

2013 Golden Jubilee edition

BIHAR YOGA®

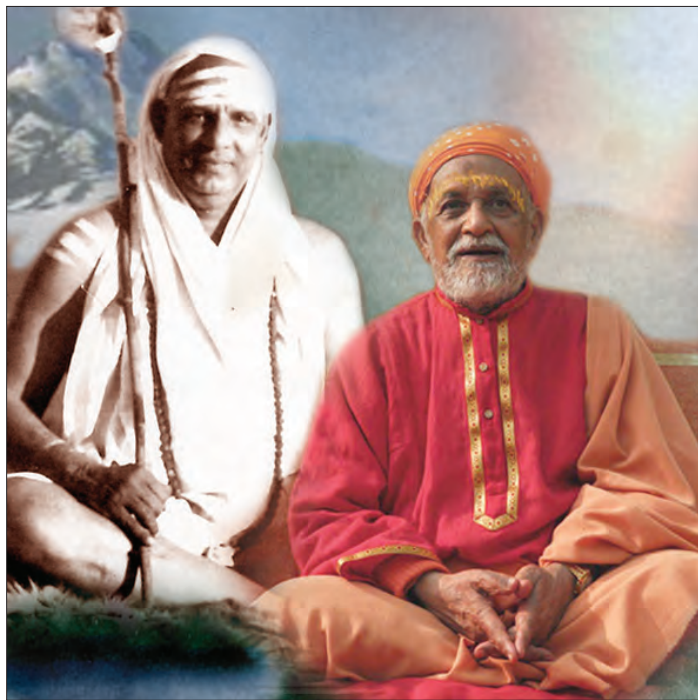
CONVERSATIONS ON THE SCIENCE OF YOGA

Hatha Yoga Book 4

ASANA

*From the teachings of
two great luminaries of the 20th century*

Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati
Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

Hatha Yoga Book 4

ASANA



1963–2013
GOLDEN JUBILEE

WORLD YOGA CONVENTION 2013

GANGA DARSHAN, MUNGER, BIHAR, INDIA

23rd–27th October 2013

CONVERSATIONS ON THE SCIENCE OF YOGA

Hatha Yoga Book 4

ASANA

*From the teachings of
two great luminaries of the 20th century*

Sri Swami Sivananda Saraswati
Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati

*Including answers from the satsangs of
Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati*



Yoga Publications Trust, Munger, Bihar, India

© Bihar School of Yoga 2013

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, transmitted or stored in a retrieval system, in any form or by any means, without permission in writing from Yoga Publications Trust.

The terms Satyananda Yoga® and Bihar Yoga® are registered trademarks owned by International Yoga Fellowship Movement (IYFM). The use of the same in this book is with permission and should not in any way be taken as affecting the validity of the marks.

Published by Yoga Publications Trust

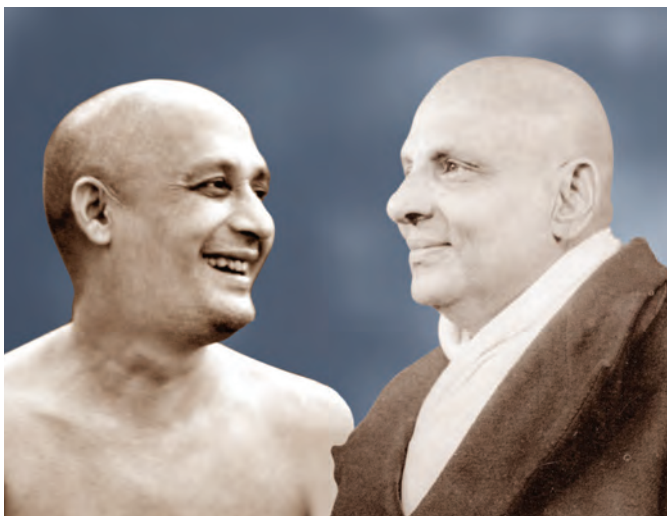
First edition 2013

ISBN: 978-93-81620-74-8

Publisher and distributor: Yoga Publications Trust, Ganga Darshan,
Munger, Bihar, India.

Website: www.biharyoga.net
www.rikhiapeeth.net

Printed at Aegean Offset Printers, Greater Noida



Dedication

*In humility we offer this dedication to
Swami Sivananda Saraswati, who initiated
Swami Satyananda Saraswati into the secrets of yoga
and to our guru Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati
who continues to inspire and guide us
on our spiritual journey.*

Swami Niranjan

Contents

Preface	<i>ix</i>
Introduction	1
1. Understanding Asana	7
2. Benefits and Effects of Asana	32
3. Asana Sadhana	68
4. Beginners' Asanas	99
5. Intermediate Asanas	170
6. Advanced Asanas	253
7. Meditation Asanas	274
Appendices	
A: Index of Questions	317
B: Index of Scriptural Quotes	337
C: Index of Illustrations	348
Glossary	257
General Index	372

Preface

CONVERSATIONS ON THE SCIENCE OF YOGA

Conversations on the Science of Yoga is an encyclopaedic series which brings together the collected teachings of two generations of masters – Swami Sivananda Saraswati of Rishikesh and Swami Satyananda Saraswati of Munger. Satsangs given by Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati on his numerous national and international tours also provide the answers to many questions on this vast subject. These luminaries represent a living tradition in which the eternal knowledge and wisdom of yoga has been passed from guru to disciple in a dynamic continuum from the early twentieth century to the first decades of the twenty-first century.

The series consists of sets of books which present the timeless culture of yoga topic by topic, in question and answer format. In this way, complex and profound subjects such as karma yoga, hatha yoga and bhakti yoga, are presented in clear, simple language. These conversations on yoga reflect an ancient and enduring approach to the transmission of wisdom, in which spiritual aspirants seek answers to their questions at the feet of the guru.

Many of the answers also include verses from the various relevant scriptures, connecting the modern experience with the classical tradition. It is through the lives and teachings of the masters that the scriptures are correctly and intuitively

interpreted for each generation, ensuring that the light of these revelations continues to illumine and inspire the hearts and minds of all who aspire for spiritual upliftment.

Conversations on the Science of Yoga has been compiled from the rich archive of satsangs and writings, both published and unpublished, which is held at the Bihar School of Yoga, Munger. The organization of this material into the major branches of yoga and related topics creates a unique interpretation of the classical yogic sciences for the benefit of humanity in the modern era. Deeply founded in tradition, the teachings are both systematic and practical, addressing the needs of individuals and society at a time when adjustment to constant change is placing unprecedented pressure on people all over the world.

The Bihar Yoga tradition

The Bihar School of Yoga is ideally placed to produce this major contribution to yogic literature. Founded in 1963 by Swami Satyananda Saraswati, the system known in India as Bihar Yoga and internationally as Satyananda Yoga, seamlessly integrates all facets of the yogic tradition, including the various branches of yoga, the philosophies which are fundamental to the yogic culture and the

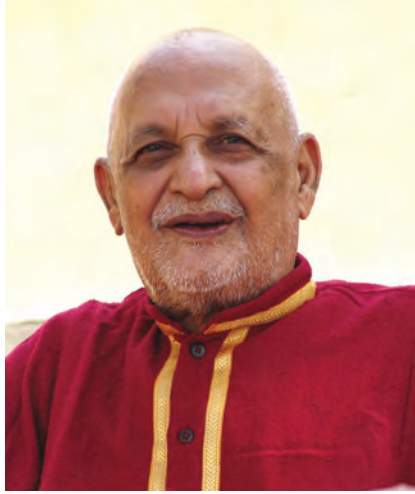


dynamism of self-realized preceptors which ensures that the teachings remain fresh and relevant in any age. This all-inclusive approach means that yogic practices are available as tools for holistic life management, while other *vidyas*, spiritual sciences, such as Tantra, Vedanta and Samkhya provide a broad philosophical base. Emerging from this living tradition, *Conversations on the Science of Yoga* is a unique and precious offering to humanity.



Swami Sivananda Saraswati (1887–1963)

Swami Sivananda was a towering spiritual force in the yogic renaissance which developed in India in the first half of the twentieth century. After serving as a doctor in Malaya, he returned to India to pursue his spiritual aspirations, and in 1924 was initiated into Dashnami sannyasa in Rishikesh. He founded the Divine Life Society, toured India extensively, wrote hundreds of books and inspired thousands around the world to practise yoga and lead a divine life. Swami Sivananda's eightfold path of yoga – serve, love, give, purify, do good, be good, meditate, realize – expresses his philosophy of service to humanity and continues to guide the work of the Bihar School of Yoga.



Swami Satyananda Saraswati (1923–2009)

Swami Satyananda was initiated into Dashnami sannyasa by his guru Swami Sivananda, in 1947. After serving his guru's mission in Rishikesh for twelve years, he founded the International Yoga Fellowship in 1956 and the Bihar School of Yoga in 1963. From that base he took the teachings to the rest of the world, fulfilling the mandate of his guru to 'spread yoga from door to door and shore to shore.'

Through his genius and compassion, many ancient, complex and esoteric practices were systematized, simplified and made available to people of all ages, cultures and creeds. Swami Satyananda's blend of charisma and pragmatism attracted multitudes of devotees wherever he went, giving rise to a global movement and creating a far-reaching network of ashrams, yoga centres and teachers. Meanwhile, the headquarters in Bihar continued to expand its many programs, including the publishing division, producing numerous books that both preserve and disseminate the incredibly rich seam of practical wisdom which flows through this lineage.

In 1988 Swami Satyananda renounced his mission in order to live as a paramahansa sannyasin, performing higher

spiritual and vedic sadhanas in an isolated location. During this chapter of his life, he also realized his guru's teaching of 'serve, love, give', by establishing Sivananda Math, an organization dedicated to raising the living standards of the weaker and underprivileged sectors of society.

At midnight on 5 December 2009, Sri Swami Satyananda Saraswati attained mahasamadhi.



Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati (1960)

A yogi from earliest childhood, Swami Niranjanananda joined the Bihar School of Yoga in 1964 and was initiated into Dashnami sannyasa in 1971. At the age of eleven he was sent to live abroad by his guru Swami Satyananda, giving him direct experience and understanding of people from a vast array of cultures and walks of life. These years instilled in him a rare, cross-cultural insight into human nature, enabling him to communicate and interact with the international community with familiarity, ease and humour.

Combined with his depth of spiritual and yogic knowledge, this background equipped Swami Niranjanananda to guide the Bihar School of Yoga and the international yoga movement from 1983 until 2008, when he began handing

over the administration to the next generation. During this time he also authored many classic books on yoga, tantra and the upanishads and founded Bihar Yoga Bharati, the world's first yoga university, while continuing extensive national and international touring.

Following retirement from his role at the Bihar School of Yoga, Swami Niranjanananda established Sannyasa Peeth for the development and training of sannyasins, and for his own pursuit of the higher sadhanas of sannyasa.

As the spiritual successor to Swami Satyananda, Swami Niranjanananda continues to inspire aspirants around the world.



Yoga is not a philosophy, it is a practical science. Philosophy gives you knowledge, yoga gives you experience. This is the beauty of yoga. That experience is a manifestation of your inner being.

—Swami Satyananda Saraswati

Introduction

The first condition of human happiness is the possession of a sound body. It is common knowledge that a sound mind, or a healthy mental condition, prevails in a healthy body. The yogasanas thus form the backbone of applied yoga.

—*Swami Satyananda Saraswati*

Asanas have become the gateway to yoga: it is due to the popularity of asanas that yoga has become a household word around the world. Unique in their versatility, practicality and beauty, asanas are the flagship of the yoga movement, attracting millions of people from all cultures and walks of life. Through their connection with asanas, many practitioners go on to discover something subtle, something unknown, something light and fresh and true, of which they had no prior knowledge. Out of this discovery comes transformation, as the gentle healing power of asana quietly and holistically works on the body and mind. With this release of the body-mind from stagnation, an imperceptible emergence of the inner being, which is spirit, unfolds.

It is said that hatha yoga is the foundation for all other yogas, and it could likewise be claimed that within the system of hatha yoga, asanas are its foundation. The scriptures tell us that 8,400,000 asanas were given by Shiva, the originator of yoga – one for every species, representing the number

of incarnations an individual must pass through on the journey to liberation. Seen in this way, asanas embody the evolution of the soul from the simplest form of life to the most complex – that of a fully realized human being. Within the structure of yoga, therefore, it is the asanas that tell the story of life itself.

Steady and comfortable

Due to their physical basis, asanas have often been disregarded by spiritual seekers, even in India, and their current popularity includes many who know asanas primarily as an exercise system for optimizing physical health. According to Swami Satyananda, however, “asanas should be thought of not as physical poses, but as states of being.” This idea in itself generates expanded thinking as, in an attempt to understand the concept of *yogasana*, one begins to contemplate the meaning and possibilities of such a statement. For this, a look at the classical view is helpful.

The most commonly quoted definition of asanas is from the *Yoga Sutras* of Sage Patanjali (2:46): *sthiram sukham asanam*, steady and comfortable should be the posture. Although the *Yoga Sutras* are not a hatha yoga text, and it is often said that in the *Sutras* asana refers only to the meditation postures, the idea of stability and comfort succinctly encapsulates the spirit of asana. Importantly, this definition involves more than the body, for the *raja* yoga of Sage Patanjali is primarily a system for the mind, indicating the presence of the mental aspect in every verse. Swami Niranjana explains the body-mind connection in Sage Patanjali’s definition when he says, “Comfort represents the state of harmony between body and mind, and stability represents the state of harmony between the different systems of the body.” Additionally, implied in any yoga practice is the component of *drashta*, the witness, which enables one to be aware and to observe oneself. Without awareness, without the *drashta*, there is no yoga. In yoga, therefore, the body can never be separated from the mind.

The inherent power of asanas is further boosted by their influence on the body's *prana*, or subtle energy, a key aim of hatha yoga. In a nutshell, the final purpose of hatha yoga is to balance and unite the two complimentary forces which flow and energize the body-mind. Known as *ida* and *pingala* nadis, they relate to the energies of the mind and body respectively. Swami Satyananda describes asanas by their action on the pranic body, saying, "Asana is a specific position which opens the *nadis*, energy channels, and *chakras*, psychic centres."

Asanas, therefore, use a three-pronged approach to harmonizing the body-mind: the physical position itself has a potent effect at the physiological level, particularly through the influence on the endocrinal and nervous systems; the dissolving of physical tensions removes blockages to the flow of the *pranas*, smoothing, enhancing and regulating their distribution; and the direct involvement of the mind through the cultivation of awareness brings consciousness to the body, which is matter.

Any notion that yogasanas are simply a form of exercise is clearly erroneous. The importance of asana is emphasized by their position in the renowned hatha yoga text, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, which says: "Prior to everything, asana is spoken of as the first part of hatha yoga. Having done asana one gets steadiness of body and mind, diseaselessness, and lightness of the limbs." (1:17) Freedom from disease and "lightness of the limbs", here implies not simply a physical experience but the state and feeling arising from the free-flow of *prana*. The sloka, therefore, refers to the three-tiered influence of asanas on body, mind and energy.

The difference between asanas and exercise is also apparent when the characteristics of the two systems are analyzed. For example, oxygen consumption during asana is minimized, whilst during exercise it is maximized. The metabolism slows down during asana whereas it speeds up with exercise. The parasympathetic nervous system is activated by asanas whereas there is sympathetic arousal

during exercise. Asanas increase flexibility, while exercise tends to build muscles, reducing flexibility. Asanas take the body through its full range of movement, while exercise tends to work on specific parts of the body, depending on the activity.

These are only some of the qualities of asanas which result in wide-ranging benefits to health and wellbeing. Swami Sivananda highlights the difference in relation to the effects on the pranic body when he says, “Physical exercises draw the *prana*, energy, out, but the asanas send the prana in. The practice of asanas cures many diseases and awakens kundalini shakti.”

Asanas in the modern era

The spread of yoga as a holistic science in society was spearheaded by Sri Swami Sivananda, whose sannyasin disciples took the teachings around the world in the second half of the twentieth century. The same period saw a parallel popularization of asanas through the hatha yoga tradition, particularly from schools in southern India, the traditional base of hatha yoga. It was due to the sannyasins from Swami Sivananda’s Divine Life Society, however, that the concept of integral yoga, which addresses all facets of human life by merging the various branches of yoga, was developed. The contribution of Bihar School of Yoga in this process was, and continues to be, of major significance.

In the interpretation of the asana component of yoga the genius of Swami Satyananda is evident in his internationally best-selling manual of hatha yoga practices, *Asana Pranayama Mudra Bandha*. Sought after by teachers and students from all schools of yoga, *APMB* has become the signature publication of Bihar School of Yoga. This single volume gives simple and practical instructions for a vast range of hatha yoga practices from basic to advanced. Within this book Swami Satyananda’s systematic method of classifying asanas is designed to be accessible to all, a clear indication that yoga is no longer a secret system for the exclusive use of yogis and

renunciates. Rather, it should now be offered for the benefit of society as a whole.

While the traditional hatha yoga texts describe a small selection of asanas which are generally either for advanced sadhakas or for meditation, Swami Satyananda has organized his selection into beginners, intermediate and advanced, listing benefits and contra-indications alongside step-by-step instructions and simple yet precise illustrations. The first practices to be described are the pawanmuktasana series which have become the starting point for asana training in the Satyananda Yoga system, preparing the body and mind for progression not only to classical asanas but also to other aspects of yoga. An innovation of Swami Satyananda himself, pawanmuktasana has come to represent the democratization of yogasana – pawanmuktasana part one, based on simple movements of the joints, can even be practised from the sick bed or by the elderly. The structure presented in *APMB* is reflected in the teaching of Satyananda Yoga classes around the world – systematic, accessible, holistic and straightforward. The presentation of specific asanas in *Hatha Yoga Book 4: Asana* is according to the system used in *APMB*, with the exception of the meditation poses which, due to their importance in classical yoga, appear in their own chapter.

The inclusion in *APMB* of pranayama, mudra, bandha and shatkarmas also positions asana within the overall hatha yoga repertoire. Corresponding to this, Satyananda Yoga sadhana is given according to the traditional sequencing, which creates a pathway from gross to subtle – shatkarmas are followed by asanas, followed by pranayama, mudra and bandha, followed by yoga nidra and/or meditation. In this way the practice of asana is taught as a component of yoga and as preparation for higher practices, in keeping with the classical tradition which repeatedly states that hatha yoga is preparation for raja yoga.

Authentic development and dissemination of yoga can only be at the discretion of an enlightened master such

as Swami Satyananda. His presentation of asanas with innovations of technique and classification has enabled the fulfilment of the mandate given by his guru to spread yoga “from shore to shore and door to door”. Only a yogi of the highest calibre is qualified to take such steps, just as in approximately AD 600 the great Yogi Swatmarama codified, organized and presented the system of hatha yoga in his classic text, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. In the opening verses to this book Yogi Swatmarama clearly states that his purpose for writing is to help people out of their confusions of mind. To this end he writes, “In good will and as a blessing, Swatmarama offers light on hatha yoga.” (1:3)

Hatha Yoga Book 4: Asana is a timely contribution to the literature on this subject. Out of the multitude of books now published on yoga, the majority focus on asana. Asanas have become the most tampered with category of yogic practice, as yoga brands and celebrities basing their name and fame on asanas proliferate around the world. Never before has there been such a need for the wisdom and understanding expressed in this book. A true yoga guru is rare, yet here three such beings offer their teachings so that the gift of asana may be received as part of the eternal and esoteric heritage of humanity. This reflects the original spirit in which yoga was revealed by Lord Shiva as Yogeshwara, the Lord of Yoga, to Shakti, the universal mother, as part of the sacred *vidya*, science of yoga, for the liberation of all from bondage and suffering.

Note

Hatha Yoga Book 4: Asana is not an instruction book. It includes illustrations of asanas not previously published by Bihar School of Yoga. Asanas should always be learned from a qualified teacher with understanding of contra-indications and precautions.

1

Understanding Asana

ASANA IN CLASSICAL HATHA YOGA

What is the meaning of the term, ‘yoga asana’?

Swami Sivananda: The meaning of the word *yoga* is commonly known. It is union of the individual soul, *jivatman*, with the supreme soul, *paramatman*. *Asana* is an easy and comfortable seat or pose or posture. Thus, the term ‘*yoga asana*’ means certain postures which bring about union of the individual soul with the supreme soul. The relationship between mind and body is so complete and so subtle that it is no wonder certain physical practices induce mental transformations.

What is the definition of asana?

Swami Satyananda: Asana is the first part of hatha yoga. In Sanskrit, asana literally means position, posture, status, state of the body. Therefore, *yogasana* means yogic posture of the body. Asana is a specific position which opens the energy channels and psychic centres.

The word asana means posture, not movement. The fish has a position, the dog has a position, the buffalo has a position, the cobra has a position, the turtle has a position and the locust has a position. A person also has a position, a posture. If one lies down flat on the floor, that is a posture. If one stands, that is a posture, sitting on a chair is a posture. Whenever the body is placed in a posture, that is the asana.

Asana means position of the body. Asana means assuming a particular physical posture comfortably and pleasantly after putting the body in a restful and peaceful state. They are postures or positions of the body which, by their very nature, quality, processes and influences, bring about a change in the electrical circuits of the *nadis*, the energy channels.

What is the concept of asana in classical hatha yoga?

Swami Satyananda: It is often believed that asanas are physical exercises. And of course they do have a profound influence on the body, but this does not convey their full significance. Each person is made up of three aspects: body, mind and consciousness, which merge together to constitute one's whole being. Asanas aim to influence these three aspects, moulding and yoking them into a harmonious whole.

As such, asanas should be thought of not as physical poses but as states of being. Correct performance of asanas requires participation of one's whole being, with awareness of oneself in relation to the physical position and movement, the breath, relaxation of the muscles and so forth. If asanas were only physical exercises it would be quite acceptable to think about work, breakfast or whatever while performing them, but this is not the case. The practice of asanas requires active involvement of one's entire being as fully as possible.

How does the yogic tradition define asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: When one can remain comfortably in a position for a long time without any tension or physical pain, that state is called asana.

The *Yoga Sutras* of Sage Patanjali define asana as *sthiram sukham asanam*, a physical posture in which one can remain steady and comfortable. In the yoga of *Gheranda Samhita*, after cleansing with the shatkarmas, asanas are practised in order to achieve physical stability and steadiness – in this context, steadiness also means stability of the body; it should be remembered that asana is a state of the body.

How many asanas are described in classical hatha yoga?

Swami Satyananda: According to *Hatharatnavali* (3:5–7):

*Vasishthaadyaishcha munibhirmatsyendraadyaishcha yogibhih.
Angeekritaanyaasanaani lakshyante kaanichinmayaa.*

*Chaturasheetilaksheshu ekaikam jeevajantushu.
Uddhritya shambhunaa proktaashchaturasheetipeethakaah.*

*Chaturasheeti peethaanaam keshaanchillakshanam bruve.
Aadinaathoditaah peethaah dehaarogya sukhapradaah.*

Some of the asanas adopted by sages like Vasishtha and yogis like Matsyendra are described by me. (5)

The almighty Shambhu has described eighty-four asanas, taking examples from each of the 8,400,000 kinds of creatures. (6)

I will describe some of these eighty-four asanas. These asanas told by Adinath bestow good health and happiness. (7)

The *Goraksha Satarka* (v. 9, 10) says, “Every one of the 8,400,000 asanas has been told by Shiva. Of these, eighty-four postures have been selected. Amongst all these, two have been selected.” Of all the hatha yoga texts, *Gheranda Samhita* describes the most asanas (thirty-two), although *Hatharatnavali* (3:8–19) lists the names of eighty-four asanas. It should be noted that although *Hatharatnavali* is a Sanskrit text, it was written by a yogi from South India and some of the names of the asanas vary from those which are given in texts that were written in the north.

Why are yogasanas spiritual?

Swami Sivananda: It is not uncommon in India to see persons capable of demonstrating yogasanas, some of which may seem at first sight disgusting and tiring. Some students can do the various exercises with amazing grace and finish.

It is wrong to suppose that these yogasanas are merely physical exercises founded by the ancient rishis of India in the same way that many systems of physical culture have recently cropped up both in Europe and America. There is something spiritual, something divine at the bottom of this system, for it awakens the sleeping kundalini shakti, it helps the yogic student establish himself fully in meditation, and finally, makes him taste the nectar of cosmic consciousness. In *Hatharatnavali* (3:4) it is written

*Hathasya prathamaangatvaadaasanam lakshyate mayaa.
Tatkuryaandaasanam sthairyam aarogyam chaangapaatavam.*

Asana, being the first component of hatha yoga, is dealt with here first of all by me. Asana brings mental as well as physical steadiness, health and a feeling of lightness.

Which asanas are the most important according to classical hatha yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Gheranda Samhita describes thirty-two asanas for stability of the body, twice the number taught by Yogi Swatmarama in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*. *Hatharatnavali* lists the ten most important but only describes four sitting postures. In *Hatharatnavali* (3:20–23) it says:

*Evamukteshu peetheshu mukhyaah proktaastathaa dasha
Svastikam gomukham padmam veerasiddhaasanam tathaa*

*Maayooram kukkutam chaiva bhadram simhaasanam tathaa
Muktaasanam tu vikhyaatam teshu madhyam chatushtayam.*

*Chaturasheetyaasanaani shivena kathitaani tu
Tebhyashchatushkaamaadaaya saarabhootam braveemyaham.*

*Siddham padmam tathaa simham bhadram cheti chatushtayam.
Shreshtham tathaapi cha satve tishthe siddhaasane sadaa.*

Among all the above asanas only ten are important: svastika, gomukha, padma, vira-siddhasana, mayura,

kukkuta, bhadra, simha and mukta. Among these, four are most important. (20–21)

Eighty-four asanas have been enumerated by Lord Shiva, I am describing here the four most important of them. (22)

Siddha, padma, simha and bhadra are these four; the best among these is siddhasana, in which one should always stay comfortably. (23)

Similarly, *Shiva Samhita* (3:84) only describes four:

*Chaturasheetyaasanaani santi naanaavidhaani cha.
Tebhyashchatushkamaadaaya mayoktaani braveemyaham.
Siddhaasanam tatah padmaasananchogram cha svastikam.*

There are eighty-four postures, of various modes. Out of them, four ought to be adopted, which I mention below: 1. siddhasana; 2. padmasana; 3. ugrasana (also called paschimottanasana); 4. swastikasana.

In *Gheranda Samhita* (2:1–2) Sage Gheranda says that each asana is based on the normal physical state of creatures in the universe:

*Aasanaani samastaani yaavanto jeevajantavah
Chaturasheeti lakshaani shivena kathitaani cha.
Tesdaam madhye vishishtaani shodashonam shatam kritam;
Tesdaam madhye martyaloke dvaatrimshadaasanam shubham.*

The number of asanas is the same as the number of animal species in the world. Lord Shiva described eighty-four lakh (8,400,000) asanas first of all, out of which eighty-four are best. (1)

Out of these eighty-four asanas, thirty-two asanas should be considered as especially auspicious in this mortal world. (2)

In *Gheranda Samhita* (2:3–6), this selection of thirty-two major static asanas is listed and described in the verses that follow:

*Siddham padmam tathaa bhadram muktam vajram cha svastikam;
Simham cha gomukham veeram dhanuraasanaameva cha.*

*Mritam guptam tathaa maatsyam matsyendraasanaameva cha;
Goraksham pashchimottaanamutkatam sankatam tathaa.*

*Mayooram kukkutam koormam tathaa chottaanakoomakam;
Uttaanamandukam vriksham mandukam garudam vrisham.*

*Shalabham makaram choshtram bhujangam yogamaasanam;
Dvattrimshadaasanaanyeva martye siddhipradaani cha.*

In this mortal world, where death of every human being is mandatory, the following thirty-two asanas are sufficient to attain perfection: 1. siddhasana; 2. padmasana; 3. bhadrasana; 4. muktasana; 5. vajrasana; 6. swastikasana; 7. simhasana; 8. gomukhasana; 9. veerasana; 10. dhanurasana; 11. mritasana (shavasana); 12. guptasana; 13. matsyasana; 14. matsyendrasana; 15. gorakshasana; 16. paschimottanasana; 17. utkatasana; 18. sankatasana; 19. mayurasana; 20. kukkutasana; 21. koormasana; 22. utthan koormasan; 23. mandookasana; 24. utthan mandookasana; 25. vrikshasana; 26. garudasana; 27. vrishasana; 28. shalabhasana; 29. makarasana; 30. ushtrasana; 31. bhujangasana; 32. yogasana.

It should be noted that the asanas discussed in *Gheranda Samhita* are not for beginners. Rather, they are final states or postures. The body needs to be prepared for the practice of the static, final-state asanas which are described in the scriptures. This is done through a range of asanas and their variations from the preparatory or dynamic groups; dynamic asanas are an essential preparation for static asanas. For example, three variations of siddhasana are described in other texts on hatha yoga, but in *Gheranda Samhita* only the final version is given. Similarly, the other asanas also have many variations, but in *Gheranda Samhita* only the final positions are described.

Why is the mental aspect important when defining asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Asana, a Sanskrit word roughly translated as ‘posture’, does not literally mean exercise or posture, but ‘at ease and relaxed’. A yogi could be standing totally upside down on one arm, in a state void of tension and stress. One who is able to achieve that can say, “I am doing an asana.”

In raja yoga, asana refers to the sitting position, but in hatha yoga it means something else. The classical raja yoga definition of asana, as given in the *Yoga Sutras* of Sage Patanjali, states that asana is a posture in which one is comfortable and stable. Is that comfort and stability only a physical state, or is it a mental state as well?

References to asana are also found in the Upanishads and the ancient tantric books. Wherever asana is mentioned, it is as a tool for creating a high quality resistance within the physical body, not only to fight disease, but to handle the effects of higher experiences. Sage Patanjali doesn’t talk about asanas as exercise. He says that postures should be practised with ‘steadiness and comfort’.

This stability means a body which is totally at ease with itself. Tensions are released, there is no tightness in the muscles, and the body is in tune with itself. Comfort means harmony between mind and body.

If there is mental agitation one cannot sit quiet physically. There will be shifting or changing of the position and that person will be in a state of nervous tension. Similarly, if the mind is at peace but the body is under stress, there will be discomfort. Comfort represents the state of harmony between body and mind, and stability represents the state of harmony between the different systems of the body. By achieving comfort and stability, physical health is experienced.

Ultimately, it is a matter of knowing one’s body; if the component of drashta is included while practising asanas, the state of comfort and stability that Sage Patanjali spoke of can be experienced in both the body and mind. It is

the generation and attainment of this quality that must be aspired for in life, not perfection in asana or in meditation.

EVOLUTION OF ASANA

Why is there more emphasis on asana in hatha yoga than raja yoga?

Swami Sivananda: According to Sage Patanjali, posture is that which is firm and comfortable. He does not lay any special stress on either asana or pranayama. It was only later on that the hatha yogis developed these two limbs of yoga, and no doubt they are of tremendous help to the yoga student.

While the hatha yogis aim at the control and culture of the body, the raja yogis aim at the control and culture of the mind. And as body and mind are interdependent, physical culture is a *sine qua non* to mental culture.

For example, one practises padmasana or siddhasana for meditative purposes, and the various other asanas, bandhas, and hatha yoga practices, for maintaining a high standard of health, vigour, strength, vitality, and for keeping up brahmacharya.

How and why did the ancient yogis develop the system of asanas?

Swami Satyananda: It is impossible to work actively in life with an unhealthy mind and body. This applies to work and play as well as to spiritual aspiration. The fundamental requirement is the healthiest possible mind and body. Thousands of years ago the ancient yogis realized this, and developed the system of asanas.

The asanas were tested thoroughly by the personal experience of these pioneers. Asanas evolved slowly through practice, and due to this, they have withstood the test of time. The body and mind of man thousands of years ago was little different to the body and mind of man today. As such, asanas are as useful in the present age as they were to the ancient originators.

Many modern systems, in all fields of activity, are based only on a few years experience. They rarely last for long periods and are usually modified due to inadequacies. Asanas, on the other hand, are a well-tested system for attaining mental and physical health.

Which asanas are described in the Yoga Upanishads?

Swami Niranjanananda: Although tradition says that there are an equal number of postures or asanas to the forms of life in creation, the Upanishads have simply maintained a group of thirteen asanas, which they consider to be important in order to bring about a state of harmony in *annamaya kosha*, the physical body.

The thirteen asanas referred to in the Upanishads are: vajrasana, which is very much a practice used for meditation and to control the sexual impulse; then gomukasana, followed by veerasana, simhasana, sukhasana, swastikasana, siddhasana, padmasana, kukkutasana, mayurasana, chakrasana, koormasana and poorna dhanurasana. Only these asanas are talked about.

These thirteen asanas became the source from which other asanas, referred to in different texts, have evolved. Various seers and thinkers of the time gradually incorporated, from their understanding, new postures into the body of asanas. During upanishadic times, however, it seems they remained happy and content with the practice of thirteen asanas and no more. They felt it was enough for a person to organize *annamaya kosha* in such a way that one could actually look within and concentrate on the subtle but bigger area of one's expression in life.

Hatha yoga originally consisted of the shatkarmas – why were asanas later included?

Swami Niranjanananda: The practices of hatha yoga were originally divided into six groups, or shatkarmas – *shat* meaning 'six' and *karma* meaning 'action'. These shatkarmas were neti, dhauti, basti, nauli, kapalbhati and trataka, the

cleansing practices. Over time, some yogis incorporated certain advanced asanas into the group of hatha yoga practices. These asanas have the specific purpose of awakening or stimulating a particular chakra or pranic field. For example, when practising *mayurasana*, the peacock posture, pressure is put on the stomach with the elbows. That pressure stimulates nerves which help to awaken manipura chakra, and the state of physical balance attained is also an aid to focus the mind.

In this way, certain postures were incorporated into the body of hatha yoga to provide greater awareness of physical balance, coordination and harmony. The number of practices varies from text to text and from thinker to thinker, according to their own experience and understanding of the human body and personality. This is probably the reason why many people consider hatha yoga to be the practice of advanced asanas. However, these asanas were added much later by teachers who felt that, in the changing world scenario, the original practices of hatha yoga were too intense and difficult for most people. The shatkarma practices become techniques of introversion, which, if one is not prepared, can alter the state of mental and conscious perception.

Why are so many asanas named after animals?

Swami Satyananda: In the yogic scriptures it is said that there were originally 8,400,000 asanas, which represent the 8,400,000 incarnations every individual must pass through before attaining liberation from the cycle of birth and death. These asanas represented a progressive evolution from the simplest form of life to the most complex: that of a fully realized human being. Down through the ages the great rishis and yogis modified and reduced the number of asanas to the few hundred known today. Of these few hundred, only the eighty-four most useful are discussed in detail. Through their practice it is possible to side-step the karmic process and bypass many evolutionary stages in one lifetime.

Many of the yogasanas are named after and reflect the movements of animals. These include *makarasana*, the crocodile pose; *kukutasana*, the cockerel pose; *mayurasana*, the peacock pose; *bakasana*, the crane pose; *garudasana*, the eagle pose; *matsyasana*, the fish pose; *bhujangasana*, the serpent pose; *shalabhasana*, the locust pose, and so on. Through observation, the rishis understood how animals live in harmony with their environment and with their own bodies.

The yogis observed that in each animal there is continual stress on a particular glandular system. They understood, through experience, the effects of each posture and how the hormonal secretions could be stimulated and controlled by it. For example, by imitating the rabbit or hare in *shashankasana* they could influence the flow of adrenaline responsible for the 'fight or flight' mechanism.

Every creature, every being, in each particular incarnation, is in that particular physical body, experiencing stress on one particular limb, organ or hormone and in this way evolution takes place. There are certain secretions and other factors which are peculiar to that particular incarnation. Asanas reflect that effect. Through imitating animal postures, the rishis found they could maintain health and meet the challenges of nature for themselves.

What is the story of asanas in the modern era?

Swami Niranjanananda: Until the 1950s yoga was practised by a limited number of people and these people were sadhakas: not social practitioners, but sadhakas who would live in isolation and practise their yoga. Of course, they practised all the advanced asanas, such as *sirshasana*, headstand pose, and *mayurasana*, peacock pose, for whatever purpose, for whatever aim, for whatever goal they had chosen for themselves, as sadhana. It was only in the 1950s that Swami Sivananda publicly began to teach yoga, and his whole yoga training system started with hatha yoga.

Then Swami Satyananda was given the mandate to propagate yoga. He started thinking about how to teach

yoga – this is the relevant point, as within the tradition, yoga has always been seen as yoga sadhana and not as yoga abhyasa. *Abhyasa* means practice and *sadhana* means perfection through practice, sustained practice. Until the 1950s there was no concept of yoga abhyasa, yoga practice; until then the concept was only of yoga sadhana, attaining perfection in the application of yoga. The asanas referred to were static postures, a posture which can be maintained and held for a long time. This is also what Sage Patanjali says about asanas in the *Yoga Sutras*.

The asanas practised today had a different name: they were called sukshma vyayama. *Sukshma* is subtle, *vyayama* means movement; the original name of most asanas practised today is *sukshma vyayama*, the subtle movement. Sage Patanjali defined the asanas as postures in which the body is held steady, in which the body is comfortable. *Sthairyam* – steadiness, *sukham* – comfort, *asanam*. According to the Patanjali system of yoga, asanas represent only the static positions which can be held and maintained for an extended period of time. If one stays in headstand for ten minutes, it is an asana. If one holds *paschimottanasana*, the back stretching pose, it is an asana. The perfection in asana is that one finds the zone of comfort; one has to be comfortable. The sukshma vyayama, the subtle movement, however, are the preliminary practices, which can lead to the perfection of asana.

Yoga is being modified by teachers around the world – is this true yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: It is only in recent times, from the 1970s onward, when people saw the opportunity of commercial gain, that yoga started to be branded as ‘hot yoga’, ‘cold yoga’, ‘power yoga’, ‘this yoga’, ‘that yoga’, representing neither the intent nor the spirit of yoga.

The way yoga is being taught in the twenty-first century does not reflect the true yoga, as the asanas have been modified to suit the body if it is not comfortable in certain

postures. For example, in India people sit on the floor all the time, but to a foreigner who is not used to sitting on the floor, it is uncomfortable, they get aches and pains, so yoga has been modified to suit them; this modified yoga is not yoga, because this modified yoga is being done as exercises.

PURPOSE

Why should young people practice asanas?

Swami Sivananda: The world needs good, healthy, strong boys and girls. What do we find in these days in India? India, the land of rishis and sages, the land which produced Bhishma, Bhima, Arjuna, Drona, Asvatthama, Kripa, Parasurama and countless other chivalrous warriors, the soil which contained numberless Rajput chiefs of undaunted courage and matchless strength, now abounds in weak and timid persons. Children beget children. The laws of health are ignored and neglected. The nation is suffering and dying. The world requires numberless brave, moral, adhyatmic soldiers who are equipped with the five virtues: ahimsa, satyam, asteya, brahmacharya and aparigraha.

What is the main purpose of asanas?

Swami Satyananda: The prime aim of asanas is to help the seeker tread the path to higher consciousness so that understanding and knowledge of one's relationship with existence can begin. Attaining higher awareness cannot even be considered when there are diseases, aches and pains or mental depression. Therefore, the initial purpose of practising asanas is to eliminate these afflictions and disturbances.

The first condition of human happiness is the possession of a sound body. A healthy body is an asset to enable man to work his way in everyday life. It is common knowledge that a sound mind, or a healthy mental condition, prevails in a healthy body. The yogasanas thus form the backbone of applied yoga.

Asanas loosen up the joints of the body, stretch and tone the muscles and remove poisons which tend to accumulate in various parts of the body. They also harmonize the nervous system and with a gentle massage they improve the functioning of all the internal organs such as the heart, lungs, abdominal organs, endocrine glands, blood vessels and so on. Slowly but surely this leads to the best possible physical health.

The mind and body are not really separate entities; they are two parts of the human organism. The mind is the controller or the computer and the body is the machinery. They are closely interrelated. Improvement in the general health of the body automatically helps to bring about positive mental changes.

What is the first aim of asanas?

Swami Niranjanananda: The first aim of asanas is relief from physical and mental distress. Asanas create temporary tension in the body, stimulating the elimination of toxins, making the joints flexible, and improving the health of the muscles. They also bring about coordination in the functioning of the nervous system and increase the efficiency of the internal organs due to their light massaging effect. Thus, with regular practice of asanas, the body gradually becomes healthier.

Why is the purpose of asanas different in raja and hatha yoga?

Swami Satyananda: In the *Yoga Sutras* of Sage Patanjali there is a concise definition of *yogasana*: *Sthiram sukham aasanam*, meaning 'that position which is comfortable and steady'. In this context, asanas are practised to develop the ability to sit comfortably in one position for an extended period of time, an ability necessary for meditation. Raja yoga equates *yogasana* with the stable sitting position.

The hatha yogis, however, found that certain specific body positions, asanas, open the energy channels and

psychic centres. They found that developing control of the body through these practices enabled them to control the mind and energy. Yogasanas became tools to higher awareness, providing the stable foundation necessary for the exploration of the body, breath, mind and higher states. For this reason, asana practice comes first in hatha yoga texts such as *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.

How does the traditional purpose of asanas differ from the contemporary approach to practice?

Swami Niranjanananda: Asanas are the basic introduction to the physical culture and discipline of yoga. They help in attaining physical balance and harmony, and also in tuning the body with the energies of the mind.

When the ancient seers conceived of yoga, their purpose in experiencing and experimenting with yoga was spiritual awareness. Their purpose was not stretching the muscles and ligaments of the body and becoming flexible and light. Nor did they use full-size mirrors in their ashrams to see if their body was in the correct posture or have bars to hold onto when stretching. When practised using mirrors and bars, yogic asanas are being used not for mental or spiritual gain, but for a physical experience of lightness and flexibility. Although asanas are used to develop awareness, unless that training and focus is present during the practice, awareness will not grow with the performance of asanas.

Asanas, therefore, only represent the ABC of yoga; they are energization practices to prepare the body, the pranic energy and the mind for higher experiences. Yoga as it is generally known in the world today consists only of a basic knowledge of hatha yoga and a basic understanding of raja yoga.

How do asanas become a means to deeper states of awareness?

Swami Niranjanananda: Think about your awareness and how broad it is. The aim of yoga practice is to become fully

aware. That awareness is not superficial. While practising an asana, how deep is one's awareness of the body? Even at that time the awareness is external. The body may be twisted in such a way that the stretch of the muscles in the back can be felt, the movement of the joints and contraction of the ligaments can be felt, but that is not total awareness. It is just partial recognition of a physical condition; it is limited awareness.

In class, the teacher often gives an instruction to put oneself inside the body, to feel the stretch of every muscle, every nerve, to feel the flexing of every joint – to feel everything from inside as if it is for the first time. The student is asked to go inside their own body and see how things work. Even the simple concept of developing physical awareness is difficult in practice. Full awareness of every moment is becoming one with the whole experience of the movement. This awareness should be developed in asana.

Is the primary purpose of asanas to enable comfortable sitting during meditation?

Swami Satyananda: Asanas are primarily aimed at controlling and steadying the inner muscles, the body and the nervous system, helping one to sit in the meditative poses without hindrance for several hours. Even if the mind is disturbed, one can sit in a meditative pose for hours if the body is steady and fit, but if the body is disturbed one cannot maintain an asana even if the mind is calm.

Are asanas practised differently for health and spiritual purposes?

Swami Satyananda: Asanas for curative purposes, such as the healing of illnesses or for attaining flexibility, are performed quite differently from asanas done with a spiritual aim. For example, yoga mudra is done quickly for spiritual benefits, but slowly for curative purposes; bhujangasana is done only once for a spiritual aim, several times for health interests. However, the ancient rishis created asanas for spiritual

practices; the healing aspect came in afterwards. Before practising asanas for their therapeutic value, a thorough knowledge of anatomy is needed.

Does the practice of asana help harmonize and unite the ida and pingala nadis?

Swami Satyananda: Yogic philosophy talks about the two forces in the physical body. One force is the life force, or *prana*, and it flows in *pingala nadi*. The other force is known as mind, *chit*, or consciousness, and it flows in *ida nadi*. We are functioning and alive due to these two forces. If one of these forces is withdrawn, we can't function – we can't live.

These two forces, however, are often in a state of disagreement or imbalance, causing mental or physical problems. When a particular posture is maintained, one is trying to unite these two forces on a single harmonious level.

Why is the practice technique important for achieving the aims of asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: The purpose of these postures, no matter how simple or how difficult they are, is to realign the function of each and every part and organ of the body. When a posture is performed it works systematically on different areas, from the bones, to the tissues, to the muscles, to the nerves, to the endocrine system, the internal organs: lungs, kidneys, heart, pancreas, everything.

Therefore, the general instructions for practising yoga are always, “Do the asana slowly, and while doing the posture experience the body, know the limitations of the body, know how much can be done while being comfortable in the way it is performed.” Every yoga teacher gives these instructions first, as a guideline for practice.

What is the purpose of asana for sincere aspirants and initiates?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are complex sadhanas and there are simple sadhanas. The simple sadhana for the

body is hatha yoga. But even in hatha yoga, people are not proficient in all the practices that are learned. Most people just select a few asanas which they enjoy doing and only become proficient in those. That yoga doesn't lead anywhere. Selecting six or seven postures that one enjoys doing, which stretch the body, stretch the muscles, and enable one to bend forward or backward in front of the mirror, feeling happy to be able to touch the toes, that is not sadhana. That is one's choice.

In sadhana it is not one's choice which is important; it is the system which becomes important. A real yogi follows the system, not the whim of the mind. For a real yogi, hatha yoga, tapasya and the various other practices become the sadhana for the body. They divert and redirect the pranas which are going out of the body through the senses, back into the self. That is the real purpose of asana, not health, not wellbeing; that is for the uninitiated. But for initiates, for real yogis, the purpose of asana is redirecting the pranic flow from the sensory channels back within oneself.

Why should the physical and mental practices of yoga be practised side by side?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the physical aspect of yoga, which is the most commonly known yoga, asanas are practised. These postures are not exercises, but states in which the body is in perfect balance and alignment. If someone is asked to stand on one leg with their eyes closed for five minutes, they will be unable to do it, as their body is lacking in harmony and distractions and disturbances take over. It can be blamed on nerves or weak muscles, but the point is that the body is not balanced. The purpose of the postures is to provide physical alignment.

The body has many channels, which carry not only blood, but also the vital force, prana, to each and every part. Practising yoga postures balances this vital energy. Therefore, in the classical yogic texts, asana is defined as a steady, comfortable state of the body in which there are no

blockages. Physical balance eventually affects the behaviour of the human brain, which has a left and right hemisphere. Yoga also believes that many centres in the brain are inactive, and that physical harmony and balance in the field of the pranas helps to activate these dormant areas. Once the brain is activated even a minute amount, a transformation takes place in the mind and consciousness.

Therefore yoga looks at the human personality not as independent units of behaviour and expression, but as one subject. If postures are practised, it will affect the mind; if meditation is practised, it will affect the body. The yoga practices complement each other. The aim of the physical practices is to complement the mental component. The mental component, influenced by the practices of concentration, relaxation and meditation, helps us to find our source, which is the spiritual nature.

Why are asanas important in spiritual life?

Swami Satyananda: The practice of asanas should not be divorced from the other aspects of yoga as it is an integral part of the yoga techniques which lead to higher awareness. This is why the ancient originators of yoga developed asanas and other yogic practices, although this is rarely considered today. The ancient yogis aimed at transcending the normal limitations of the mind and body. Their aim was to transcend individuality and to achieve self-realization. In this context, asanas were not intended specifically to develop the mind and body. This was a means to an end.

Their aim was to make the body so perfect and the subconscious mind so calm and trouble-free that these aspects of individual existence could be forgotten, and consciousness could be disentangled from the troubles of the mind and body. When the aches and pains and ailments of the body are removed and one is emotionally and mentally relaxed, awareness of the physical body and the superficialities of the mind automatically ceases. In this way the fetters of individuality can be released and one's true

nature – pure, infinite, all pervasive consciousness – can be realized.

CLASSIFICATION OF ASANA

How are asanas classified?

Swami Satyananda: The broad classification of asanas is into three groups: beginners, intermediate and advanced. It is not necessary to perform all the asanas in a particular group. Regular practice of a balanced program, tailored to individual needs, is recommended for maximum benefit.

What type of asanas are included in the beginners' category?

Swami Satyananda: The beginners' group consists of elementary techniques designed to prepare the body and mind for major and meditation asanas. These practices are in no way inferior to the advanced asanas and are useful in improving physical health. Included in this group are the pawanmuktasana series, eye exercises, relaxation, premeditation and meditation poses, asanas performed from vajrasana, standing asanas, surya and chandra namaskara.

Who should practise beginners' asanas?

Swami Satyananda: The beginners group should be performed by those who have never practised yogasanas before. A selection from this group, tailored to individual needs, can be practised by those who are infirm in any way, weak or sick. They will give greater benefits than more difficult practices. Experienced practitioners can also perform them. In particular, they will notice the profound, yet subtle balancing effects.

What type of asanas are classified as intermediate?

Swami Satyananda: The intermediate group consists of asanas which are reasonably difficult and are recommended for people who can perform the beginners' group without

discomfort or strain. These asanas require a greater degree of steadiness, concentration and coordination with the breath.

Included in this group are asanas performed from padmasana, backward and forward bending, spinal twisting, inverted and balancing asanas.

When is a practitioner ready for advanced asanas?

Swami Satyananda: The advanced group is intended for people with extensive control over their muscles and nervous system, who have already mastered the middle group of asanas. Practitioners should not be too eager to start these asanas. It is preferable to practise them under the guidance of a competent teacher.

What is the classical point of view regarding dynamic and static asanas?

Swami Satyananda: According to the classical point of view, all asanas are supposed to be calm and steady postures, but later they were physiologically divided into two groups. Asanas such as padmasana, siddhasana, yoga mudra, shavasana, shashankasana, dhanurasana and matsyasana, which require less bodily movements, are termed static asanas. Asanas with frequent body movements, such as surya namaskara, trikonasana and pada hastasana are categorized as dynamic.

Are static asanas traditional and dynamic asanas non-traditional?

Swami Niranjanananda: The concept of asana is a physical posture in which one is at total ease and in perfect harmony with oneself. This has to be understood properly. As Sage Patanjali and other yogis referred only to asanas which are static or which are used for meditation, many people believe that the other asanas, in which the body does not remain still, are not part of this classification. Many people have classified asanas as either non-traditional dynamic postures or traditional static postures, but actually asanas cannot be classified in this way. A much broader range is encompassed.

Non-traditional dynamic postures are asanas performed as fast movements, which do not allow the practitioner to remain quiet and comfortable due to the involvement in continuous movement. Surya namaskara is an example of a dynamic asana in which one is constantly moving from one posture to the next. However, this actually represents one stage of asana practice, and there are five stages which should be understood. The body has to undergo different kinds of changes; it is not static or stable by nature.

From the normal state in which body movements are used in a limited way, it moves into the second stage – the playful, dynamic state in which one runs, jumps and stretches. From there it moves into the third state where one is able to touch the toes or bend backwards without straining any part of the body. The fourth state follows, in which a balancing posture can be maintained. In the fifth stage, a posture can be adopted for an extended period of time during which the body remains perfectly still, motionless and at ease, without any type of discomfort or pain. These are the five stages of asana practice.

Sage Patanjali's statement regarding asanas refers not only to meditative postures, as is the belief of the commentators, but also to the various states of flexibility, adaptability and comfort in the body during asana practice. There is a lot of evidence available to prove the point that asanas are not only meditative, as described in the traditional literature.

Many of the Yoga Upanishads speak of various postures such as *mayurasana*, peacock pose, as being asanas in which the body is in perfect harmony with itself. Mayurasana is not an easy posture to perform as there is a lot of pressure, tension and discomfort due to the constriction of the chest, the pressure in the region of the diaphragm, the weight of the body being placed on the wrists and the effort of balancing the body. If such a posture is referred to in the Yoga Upanishads, it is necessary to think about whether 'meditation posture' is the true meaning of asana. There are other asanas described in the Upanishads such as *vrishchikasana*, scorpion pose, *surya*

namaskara, salute to the sun, which is described as the final state of asana, and *vasishthasana*, a balancing asana invented by Sage Vasishtha in which he would spend a minimum of three hours every day.

These are the types of asanas that are considered to be perfect postures, in which the total body is in harmony. In these postures the body is comfortable and there is no disturbance or tension in any part, there is concentration of mind and also blissfulness during the practice.

Looking at the various asanas that have been described, it can be seen that in the five stages that have been discussed, the body is taken from a normal state to a highly tuned and balanced state. Therefore, no matter which asana is performed, even if it is the most dynamic, in which there is pulling, stretching and pushing of every ligament, muscle and nerve of the body, there should be awareness, balance, comfort and stillness.

What is the difference between dynamic and static asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Dynamic practices often involve energetic movements of the body. They are intended to increase flexibility, improve circulation, tone the muscles and joints, release energy blocks and remove stagnant waste from different parts of the body. These asanas strengthen the lungs and improve the digestive and excretory systems. Dynamic practices are particularly useful for beginners. They include the pawanmuktasana series, surya namaskara, chandra namaskara, dynamic paschimottanasana and dynamic halasana.

Static practices of intermediate and advanced asanas are performed by experienced practitioners. They have a more subtle and powerful effect on the pranic and mental bodies. They are performed with little or no movement, the body often remaining in one position for a few minutes. These asanas are intended to gently massage the internal organs, glands and muscles as well as to relax the nerves throughout the body. They are specifically concerned with bringing

tranquillity to the mind and preparing the practitioner for the higher practices of yoga, such as meditation. Some of them are particularly useful for inducing the state of sense withdrawal, *pratyahara*.

What is the role of dynamic asanas in classical yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: The definition of asana, or posture, in the *Yoga Sutras* of Sage Patanjali is a comfortable, steady posture. The dynamic postures do not fall into this category, but the stable postures, the static asanas which can be held for some time without feeling any discomfort in the body or mind, do.

The dynamic postures help prepare the body to become stable and comfortable in the static asana, and eventually every dynamic asana can also take the form of a static asana – just imagine practising half an hour of meditation in mayurasana, the peacock! Eventually the serious practitioner of hatha yoga should achieve this type of body control.

Every individual must find a suitable posture which is conducive to the attainment of concentration, and the awakening of prana shakti. It is not necessary to only use the traditional postures of padmasana, siddhasana or sukhasana. Physical postures affect the psychic personality by either dissipating the stored up energy and consciousness, or by concentrating it.

How does one know whether to practise dynamic or static asanas?

Swami Niranjanananda: There is a distinction between asana, the sustained posture, and, *sukshma vyayama*, the subtle movement, which allows freedom of energies.

In one's medicine cabinet a variety of medicines are kept. There are Aspirins, antibiotics and other emergency medicines. There is also another shelf with vitamins, minerals and proteins. The vitamins, minerals and proteins enhance the health while the items on the upper shelf, the Aspirin and other drugs, are used for therapy. When doing

asana consider this point: advanced asanas, like standing on the head or stretching the body in mayurasana or ushtrasana or vrischikasana, are like emergency medicines. The practices which enhance health, the vitamins and minerals, are the pawanmuktasana series, the sukshma vyayama series.

When are vitamins and minerals taken? Everyday before breakfast or with breakfast one takes a few vitamins – C and B and D and others. The hard medicine is taken when there is a headache; that's when Aspirin is taken. When one is sick internally, antibiotics are taken, but once the disease is finished, once that illness has been removed, one again falls back on the vitamins and minerals and proteins. The Aspirin is not taken regularly thinking that, "If I keep taking this I will not get a headache." Antibiotics are not taken everyday with the belief that, "If I take this, I will never be sick."

Apply the same principal with yoga. Advanced yoga is for emergency only, to attain a state of body or mind which is conducive to a specific sadhana. And the general yoga for enhancing the physical, mental and spiritual health is different; the general yoga for total enhancement is the sukshma vyayama, pawanmuktasana. The trikonasana series, surya namaskara and the balancing postures fall in the sukshma vyayama category, and the advanced postures, they fall in the category of asana.

2

Benefits and Effects of Asana

PHYSICAL AND HEALTH

Why are asanas the ideal system of physical culture?

Swami Sivananda: It is important to know what an ideal system of physical culture should be, so that the value of yogasanas can be judged in the light of the ideal. An ideal system is that which requires the smallest amount of energy to be spent in order to secure the greatest amount of benefit. It can effect a maximum increase in the vital index, build up a healthy nervous system, ensure health for the excretory organs of the body, take care of the circulatory system, and also develop the muscular system. All these conditions are fulfilled by yogasanas.

Why are asanas so beneficial for health?

Swami Sivananda: Health is wealth. Health is indeed a covetable possession. Good health is a valuable asset for one and all. It can be achieved by the regular practice of yogasanas.

The practice of asanas controls the emotions, produces mental peace, distributes prana evenly throughout the body and different systems, helps in maintaining healthy functioning of the internal organs, and gives an internal massage to the various abdominal organs.

Physical exercises draw the *prana*, energy, out, but the asanas send the prana in. The practice of asanas cures many

diseases and awakens kundalini shakti. These are the chief advantages in the yogic system, which no other system has.

What are the main benefits of practising asanas?

Swami Niranjanananda: Asanas have four major benefits: i) the internal biorhythms are harmonized; ii) the pranic energy in one's system becomes regulated; iii) the blockages and tensions in different muscles are removed; iv) there is harmony in the performance of the sympathetic and parasympathetic activities of the body. There are many other benefits, but these are the four main ones.

How do asanas benefit the physical structure of the body?

Swami Sivananda: Thickened and immovable joints with consequent lack of free movement give a great deal of discomfort and uneasiness. If the joints move freely, the ligaments and surrounding tissues will be in a healthy condition. By the practice of asanas, free movement is given to the elbow, wrist, ankle, shoulder and spinal joints. Free movement prevents the spine from stiffening and contracting, checking ossification and degeneration of the bones in the spinal column. Muscles of the cervical, dorsal and lumbar regions are also stretched and relaxed. The body is thus kept in a fit condition.

If muscles are not properly exercised, they contract. The blood circulation and nerve force are consequently impeded and functional disturbances of the organs and of the general nerve-tone result. The muscles atrophy. Practice of asanas keeps the muscles, organs and nerves in a healthy condition. Sound functioning of the organs depends upon good healthy nerves.

Yoga, therefore, is the perfect system of physical culture. It is the king of all exercise systems. By practising these yogic exercises the body is made strong and healthy. There is no use theorizing: what is wanted is regular, systematic, sustained practice. An ounce of practice is better than tons of theory. Many people practise these exercises by fits and

starts and give up the practice after some months, hence the maximum benefits of the system are not derived. Regularity in the practice is a necessity.

How does asana practice make the body healthy?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are different systems of yoga. One branch of yoga is hatha yoga, which is the physical component of yoga, including the practice of physical postures called asanas. Asanas work at the physical level, stretching and toning the body. When the body is toned and the systems are working in harmony with each other, physical efficiency increases a hundredfold.

There are many different kinds of postures. What is their aim, what are they meant for? The postures or asanas are classified into groups. One group releases pressure or tensions and tightness from the body. Another group directly influences and affects the internal organs of the body. Another group releases the energy blocks from different parts of the body. Another group is used in healing the body. There are a wide variety of postures or physical movements that can be done by the individual.

Numerous studies have been conducted around the world, proving that many physical problems, illnesses and diseases can be managed through yoga. Respiratory problems, circulatory problems and digestive problems can be effectively managed through yoga. People are now working on autoimmune deficiencies and have found that when the postures are performed, they alter the behaviour of the organ which is affected.

Sometimes a change can happen in the body which is similar to a miracle. Of course, it is not a miracle, it is just the body regaining its health and wellbeing. Take, for example, diabetes, in which glucose is not absorbed by the body and insulin is not produced in the body. Medical research has shown that through the practice of asanas it is possible to correct this state. Similarly, yogasanas have been found beneficial in remedying various specific physical disorders.

There is also the general toning and enhancing of physical abilities. Yoga believes that as the muscular and nervous blocks are relieved, the body is revitalized. This has been the subjective experience of many people who practise yoga. The feeling of energy, the feeling of stamina, the ability to control the tiredness of the body by controlling the breath, the ability to bring down the heartbeat, hypertension and the hyperactivity of the brain through breath regulation, to sharpen the senses so as to optimize performance; these are some of the outcomes of the physical postural practices.

How do asanas keep all the systems of the body in a healthy condition?

Swami Sivananda: The three major organs, the heart, lungs and brain, and the cerebro-spinal system, are kept in a healthy condition by the regular practice of asanas. The heart, lungs and other organs are all stimulated or retarded through nerves that proceed from the brain and the spinal cord. The spinal cord is toned by asanas and the circulation of blood in the arteries and veins is kept in proper order by their practice. This means there is no stagnation of blood in any part of the body and the development of arteriosclerosis or hardening of the arteries is prevented. The practice of asanas lubricates the whole bodily system.

How do asanas remove disease?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the classical hatha yoga texts at the end of the description of each asana, it is usually stated that practising it removes diseases. Even if it is understood that the practice of these static asanas brings the mental benefits of a peaceful mind and a reduction in thoughts and internal excitement, doubts may remain about the removal of physical ailments. Therefore, it needs to be understood how yoga works to overcome disease.

Diseases which originate from the body and then influence the mind are called somopsychic diseases. They

may be due to bacteria or external impurities entering the body. Diseases which originate in the mind and then influence the body are called psychosomatic diseases. Diseases are therefore of two types and, according to yoga, eighty percent of physical diseases originate in the mind.

According to this principle, when the mind is peaceful and stable, when it is calm and no longer excited, when internal tension and affliction are absent, there is also an effect on the body. The body automatically starts to become more controlled and balanced.

Modern scientific medicine tends to treat the symptoms of a disease. Headache is a symptom, not a disease. Taking a painkilling tablet such as Aspirin cures the symptom, not the cause. Asthma is also a symptom. Taking medicine or spraying a bronchodilator expands the airways for a while, but the disease remains and is not rooted out. Diabetes is also a symptom. In diabetes the pancreas is not producing sufficient insulin. The insulin can be replaced by injection, but this does not correct the functioning of the pancreas.

It has often been observed that yogic practices heal many physical diseases. With the practice of yoga nidra, the body and *antahkarana*, the inner apparatus consisting of ego, intellect, memory and thought, attains a state of rest. Tension, worries and distress are removed. Japa increases self-confidence. Pranayama enhances the immune power of the body and balances the pranas.

Yoga uses these principles for treatment. Often it may appear that the practices which are prescribed could aggravate a disease, but those practices leave a positive effect on the mind, brain, nervous system and endocrine glands, enabling them to function properly.

It is believed that if the body becomes stable, the mind becomes steady, and that stability of the mind influences the body. Daily practice establishes and regulates the healthy at-ease state of the body and mind in which dis-ease is eradicated. That is why for almost every asana it is said, *sarva vyaadhi vinaashakam*, all diseases are destroyed.

What does scientific research say about the effect of asanas on the body?

Swami Niranjanananda: Clinical and scientific investigations done at Bihar School of Yoga and by scientists such as Dr. Aleksandrowicz T. Pasek and W. Romanowski in Poland, and M.A. Wenger and B.K. Bagchi in India, show that with the practice of asanas an aspirant has higher scores in the evaluation of autonomic balance and lowered sympathetic activity. Heartbeat, blood pressure and blood flow become synchronized and constant, which helps to create a type of resonance in the involuntary body functions. Skeletal, muscular, endocrinal and nervous systems then respond in a highly sensitive manner to ensure proper function and maintain health.

Why is the powerful effect of asanas on the endocrine system so significant?

Swami Satyananda: The endocrine system consists of various glands located throughout the body which secrete special substances called hormones. Each of these hormones has a specific function to perform in the body. They act as triggers which prompt the various organs into higher or lower levels of activity as required, or in some cases, such as the women's menstrual cycle, they initiate and terminate various processes. These hormones also interact with and modify the activities of each other. For optimum health the entire system must be in balance and perfectly coordinated, each gland secreting the required hormone in the right quantity at the right time. If there is disharmony in the endocrinal system there will be a malfunction in one or more of the bodily processes and possibly in the emotional makeup of one's personality. There is such an intricate interrelationship between the various glands that one malfunctioning gland can cause disruption to the whole system.

Asanas are designed to rectify overactivity or sluggishness of individual glands as well as harmonize the control

centre of the system in the brain. This is why even simple asanas can sometimes bring about astonishingly quick benefits.

Endocrinal disorders are not usually organic – they are generally functional. In other words, the individual glands are capable of working correctly but don't, perhaps due to stress or misuse of the body. This can be compared to a car. If the petrol mixture is too rich, or the air and petrol intake pipes are blocked, the car will cease to work or will not run smoothly. It still has the capacity to work properly and will do so when the necessary adjustments are made. With the endocrine system the functional breakdown may be due to ineffective nerve impulses or insufficient supply of oxygenated blood, perhaps due to incorrect breathing. Asanas automatically and gently rectify this condition, bringing the system into proper working order again.

Do certain asanas influence specific parts of the body?

Swami Satyananda: Certain postures such as *bhujangasana*, cobra pose, *shalabhasana*, locust pose, *sarvangasana*, shoulder stand pose, and *matsyasana*, fish pose are maintained for a minute or so when practised. During this time the endocrine glands in the body are stimulated and balanced. The practice of asanas has a strong influence on the endocrine secretions. When these glands start working efficiently, a state of balance is created in the body, resulting in the removal of many diseases.

Each asana has its own specific effect on the body. *Bhujangasana*, for example, is good for the liver and spine; *sarvangasana* is good for the thyroid and the abdomen; *halasana* together with *paschimottanasana* influences the pancreatic glands; *garudasana* is good for strengthening the ligaments of the whole body. There are certain asanas which improve eyesight, others improve digestive power, and there are those which improve memory. Some asanas increase height and weight and others bring control to the mind.

Are asanas more effective at curing disorders or preventing them?

Swami Sivananda: The asanas are preventive and curative. That is the beauty of this system. Some exercises move the body forward and backward, while others help with the lateral movement of the spine. Thus the body as a whole is developed, toned and strengthened. A whole practice session can be finished in fifteen minutes. Within this short period the maximum benefits can be realized, with all the organs of the body toned and exercised.

The practitioner of hatha yoga is agile and nimble, with an elastic spine, supple body and a keen vigorous appetite. Any trouble is removed at its starting point by the practice of asanas. This system is simple, exact, efficacious, economical time-wise and suitable for self-practise in the home.

How do asanas help prevent disease?

Swami Satyananda: Mental problems or tension, as well as an unhealthy body, are the prime cause of most diseases which afflict mankind. The body, however, has remarkable powers to heal itself, and through the immune system has great strength to naturally resist the onset of disease. A body that is unhealthy and a mind that is tense tend to whittle away these powers making the body more vulnerable to illness. Asanas help the body to resist disease by bringing the mind and body into the best possible condition.

A body saturated with poisons and toxins is a breeding ground for germs and is conducive to attack by disease. Asanas help purify the body and thereby prevent diseases occurring. Some ailments are caused by malfunctioning of internal organs: blood pressure, heart attack, diabetes and so on. Asanas prevent this happening by bringing all the relevant organs into good working condition, improving nerve connections and also by reducing chronic mental stress, the latter being the root cause of most of the problems in the first place.

Asanas not only prevent disease, but for the same reasons they also help to eliminate many types of diseases.

Why do asanas have such a powerful therapeutic effect?

Swami Satyananda: Yoga therapy, according to scientific understanding, takes place on account of the balancing effect which is created by yoga postures in the nervous system. By creating balance in the nervous system, regulation of the endocrine glands is effected.

How do asanas help rectify the physical imbalances caused by daily life?

Swami Niranjanananda: One aspect of hatha yoga is its physical effect. This physical effect is used to help harmonize the body and bring awareness of the different imbalances within the physical structure. It is these imbalances which cause various types of stress and tension. Muscular and physical stress cause a state of imbalance which in turn results in various aches and pains, psychosomatic and somopsychic disorders, as the harmony of the body is distorted.

For example, how many types of physical movement does a person go through in an average day? When sitting in a chair; the body is bent. When sitting on the floor, the body is bent. When sitting on the bed, the body is bent. Most physical movements during the waking state create a lot of physical tension. How many times is the body actually stretched? How many times is traction actually provided to the body during the day? Very few. How many times is the body twisted in a controlled way without any jerk? Very few. How many times is a conscious effort made to curve the body backward? Very rarely. Apart from sleeping flat in bed, the majority of time is spent in a forward bend posture. This posture creates tension.

Such imbalance creates a distortion in the functioning of the internal organs and systems. The digestive system is definitely affected, unless the digestive tract is very powerful.

The physical aspect of yoga aims to eliminate this imbalance by prescribing various postures or asanas. Asanas are smooth, controlled movements which are done slowly and with awareness, to provide the maximum stretch to the body in every direction.

Apart from the physical structure of the body, different levels of energy are experienced. At the time of waking one feels fresh and energetic. By the end of the day one feels down, low on energy, tired. If one then rests for some time and the body is able to recuperate, the level of energy goes up, the state of tiredness goes away and the feeling improves. So the level of energy also increases with the state of physical relaxation and decreases when the body is in the state of tension.

This means that when the physical aspect of yoga in the form of asanas is practised by stretching the body in different directions, the muscle structure is also being relaxed. It is like a general tuning, benefiting the tissues, bones and nervous system, and massaging internal organs like the liver, kidneys, intestines and stomach. In this way the whole body can be brought to a state of balance. Some people are able to do it, some people are not able to do it, but this is the aim.

Does asana practice create change at the neurocellular level?

Swami Niranjanananda: Over time, the awareness which is gained through the practice of yoga becomes a natural, spontaneous part of one's nature and life. This process reflects a change in the neurocellular structure of the physical body. When an asana or posture is practised, what is actually happening in the body, what is the actual effect of the asana? At the neurocellular and neuromuscular level, the body is being altered.

This alteration of the body is not felt externally: the person remains the same, but the cells and the muscles are being transformed. Whether the practice is pawanmuktasana,

dynamic postures such as surya namaskara, intermediate postures, balancing, or advanced postures like *sirshasana*, headstand, *mayurasana*, peacock or *vrishchikasana*, scorpion, all these different types of asanas actually transform the neurocellular structure of the body.

How does the practice of yogasanas help with weight reduction?

Swami Satyananda: Chitta and prana, the mental and life forces have to be balanced through the practices of yoga. This is a vital point. To accomplish this, one starts with the practice of yogasanas. They are of major importance as these yogic postures create certain effects and influences throughout the nervous systems, endocrinal system and psychic centres of the body.

For example if one is overweight and practices paschimottanasana, it is wrong to think that the movement of the waist, thighs and stomach is accelerating the metabolism of fat. No. Paschimottanasana balances the hormonal secretions, bringing balance to the metabolic functions of the body. This is how weight reduction occurs

ASANAS AND EXERCISE

Are yogasanas a type of exercise for the physical body?

Swami Satyananda: Asanas are not yoga exercises and they should not be referred to as exercises. Asanas are not regarded as physical exercises; asana and physical exercise are two entirely different things. Asana does not at all mean exercise, not at all. Asana means posture.

Yoga has not been understood in the right perspective. It has been observed that yoga builds the body, improves blood circulation and increases the oxygen supply to the lungs. Maybe it does, but these are not the actual purpose of yoga. Asanas are certain postures of the body which were revealed by the great rishis and munis who were the scientists of their age.

Each particular posture stimulates certain glands in the endocrinal system. They are important practices, every one of which is directly related to the energy flows in the body. Therefore, in the practice of *yogasana* one should generally concentrate on the spinal postures that tone the dormant psychic centres, and which are not influenced by physical exercises other than *asana*. *Asanas* are not to be considered as gymnastic exercises but as postures, and a state of being.

How does the effect of *asanas* on the body differ to the effects of exercise?

Swami Satyananda: Before the difference between *asanas* and exercises can be understood, it is necessary to know that exercise imposes a beneficial stress on the body. Without it the muscles waste, the bones become weak, insulin insensitivity can occur, and the ability to meet the physical demands of sudden activity is lost.

By contrast, *asanas* are techniques which place the physical body in positions that cultivate awareness, relaxation, concentration and introversion. Part of this process is the development of good physical health by stretching, massaging and stimulating the pranic channels and internal organs, so *asana* is complementary to exercise.

The effects of *asanas* on the body are vastly different to the effects of exercise. Some of the effects are:

- In yoga postures the consumption of oxygen is minimal, while in physical exercises it is maximum.
- In yoga postures the respiration reduces, during exercises it increases.
- In yoga postures the body cools down, whereas in exercises heat is generated.
- In yoga postures the metabolic rate slows down, while in exercises it increases.
- In exercises the muscles receive extra blood supply at the expense of the other organs; in yoga, the blood supply remains even.

- In exercises blood pressure rises quickly and is then released quickly, whereas in yoga it remains balanced.
- Practitioners of yoga need a stable amount of food, while people doing physical exercise need extra calories.
- Yogasanas have specific effects on the glands and internal organs, and positively alter the sympathetic/parasympathetic balance in the nervous system, while exercises have a generalized effect on the glands and organs, and tend to arouse the sympathetic nervous system.

Games and sports help to build the body and give strength to the muscles, but yogasanas have a special benefit, which the other exercises cannot give. Sports and physical exercises also require a greater amount of time, a larger space and other accessories, while yogasana do not require extra things and take little time. Some asanas are difficult and others are easy, but each asana has its own benefits.

What are the strengthening effects of asanas?

Swami Niranjanananda: Gaining physical energy or power through asanas does not mean gaining muscular power. It is not like doing sit-ups or other purely physical exercises in order to make the body like that of a wrestler. In *Gheranda Samhita* (1:10) it is written:

*Shatkarmanaa shodhanam cha aasanena bhaveddridham;
Mudrayaa sthirataa chaiva pratyahaarena dheerataa.*

Through shatkarmas purification of the body is achieved, through asanas firmness, through mudras steadiness and through pratyahara patience is achieved.

Here, firmness or strength means physical capacity, inner strength and gaining good health. After all, one can be big and strong but still become ill. Here, there is a subtle relationship between attaining physical and mental health and strength through asanas, after purification through shatkarmas.

Why are asanas more effective than exercise for developing flexibility?

Swami Satyananda: In most systems of physical culture, the muscles are brought into play during contraction and strengthened. During most asanas, however, the emphasis is on stretching the muscles. The muscles cannot stretch themselves as their mode of action is through contraction. In asanas the muscles are stretched by assuming various body positions which automatically apply an elongation to particular muscles. A muscle can be slowly and gradually stretched by practice, so that it can eventually extend well beyond its normal limitations. This elongation squeezes out stagnant blood and allows it to be replaced by pure oxygenated blood when the muscle resumes its normal shape.

To stretch the muscles it is important that they are fully relaxed. If the muscles are tense they will automatically resist any attempt made to stretch them. This relaxation of the muscles can be developed with practice, as one systematically gains control over them.

What is the role of dynamic and static asanas in sadhana?

Swami Satyananda: All of the asanas have their own special curative values. They are systematically and scientifically classified according to various abnormal bodily functions and diseases. Different asanas are prescribed for the diseases of lungs, digestive systems, blood circulation, metabolism, eyesight, glandular functions, the excretory system and so on.

Static asanas have the beneficial effect of either activating or slowing down abnormal glandular secretions, thereby making the blood circulation efficient and perfect. They vitalize the body organism and produce spiritual strength. These asanas are necessary to induce calmness in the body and mind. Dynamic asanas make the body warm, quicken blood circulation, tighten the body's skin and muscles, strengthen the lungs and stimulate the digestive functions.

Quick and sudden movements use up excessive energy, whereas the object of asanas is to conserve energy. For this reason even the dynamic asanas are done slowly. Asanas also aim to slow down the breathing rate, thereby improving the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the lungs as well as inducing mental tranquillity.

Muscular control is an essential feature and is an aim of asanas; it is attained by slow movements, not by sudden jerks. The muscles are to be stretched and this can only be done if they are relaxed; fast movements imply excessive muscular tension. During slow movements it is possible to relax the maximum number of muscles that are not needed for the movement.

Why is it important to maintain static poses?

Swami Satyananda: The final position is the most important part of asana practice. During this time specific parts of the body are influenced. The body is held in such a way that certain muscles are stretched to the limit of present flexibility and certain organs are given the best possible squeeze or massage, and extra blood is directed to or removed from particular regions.

This period of immobility is the time when profound and beneficial changes are occurring in the body. With some asanas it is also a time when deep states of concentration can be reached if the final position is held for extended periods of time. Correct, relaxed respiration is essential in the final static position in order to accentuate the influence of the asana on the body by increasing the massage of the internal organs and by stimulating the exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide through the blood.

What happens when a yogasana is held for some time?

Swami Satyananda: When a posture is maintained for some time, pressure is exerted on a particular gland of the body. According to modern science there are two types of glands in the body, while according to yoga there are three types of

‘glands’: endocrine glands, exocrine glands and the energy system. A blockage can occur in any one of these three systems.

Endocrine glands can be blocked; when insulin is blocked one gets diabetes, when adrenalin is blocked one gets asthma. There are also exocrine glands. These exocrine glands are responsible for the biochemical structure of the body, like saliva, hydrochloric acid, enzymes, and so on.

The third type is energy. This energy can also be blocked and this energy block can create mental, physical and emotional problems. When a yoga posture is maintained for a particular period of time, then one, two or three blocks of the endocrine, exocrine and energy systems are removed. Therefore it is not only concentration that matters, but also position.

ASANAS AND THE MIND

What influence do asanas have on the mind-body complex?

Swami Satyananda: Asanas exercise a profound influence on the mind-body complex. Regular practice of asanas helps to make one master of the mind and body, rather than the slave. A beautiful, strong body without a correspondingly developed mind is as insufficient as a highly intellectual mind contained within a weak, sickly body. The ideal is to have both a strong healthy mind and a strong healthy body. This is the aim of asanas as well as yoga in general.

How do asanas influence one’s mental outlook?

Swami Satyananda: The stepping stone to higher awareness and a happy life is an optimistic attitude. Asanas help to change and reorientate a person’s mental outlook. How? There are various answers, which will be discussed in turn.

1. Asanas greatly influence the functioning of the endocrine system. This system exerts vast control over one’s life. It carries out countless indispensable functions within

the body and influences physical appearance, emotional outlook and many aspects of one's behaviour and attitude towards life. A person who has a healthy endocrine system is generally optimistic, clear in thought and positive in action. A person with a system that is out of balance tends to be unhealthy, pessimistic, and either excessively active or inactive physically and mentally. Endocrinology is an interesting science encompassing reproduction, digestion, emotional reactions, and all aspects of life.

This system has a major influence on one's emotional makeup, which is intimately connected with the mental processes. As such, improvement of this system alone, through the practice of asanas, can result in profound changes in one's attitude to life.

2. Asanas bring about harmony in the various other bodily systems. These systems are rhythmic in nature and include the blood, nervous, respiratory, digestive and endocrine systems, which are all intimately related to each other. When the proper working relationship between these bodily processes is lost there is a resultant loss of health and body efficiency. This has repercussions for emotional and mental wellbeing. Asanas coordinate these various systems, bringing rhythm and balance into the body-mind complex.

3. Asanas have subtle influences on the body which may not be recognized by science. Surrounding and permeating the whole body is an energy field which is normally imperceptible to the senses. In yoga this is called the *pranamaya kosha*, energy sheath, and is commonly known as the etheric body by people who have developed their psychic potential. This energy field has been detected and photographed using Kirlian photography and is also known as bioplasma or bioluminescence. This energy travels in and around the body in specific pathways, which in yoga are known as *nadis*. These pathways easily become blocked and prana becomes congested in certain areas, which can lead to physical and mental disorders. Asanas encourage free flow of prana and thereby facilitate good health. Further, this

energy body is intimately connected to the mind. As such, the uninhibited flow of prana brought about by asanas leads to mental equilibrium and calmness.

4. Asanas automatically bring about a change in breathing. Rapid and irregular breathing signifies tension in mind and body, whereas slow, deep and rhythmical breathing indicates calmness and wellbeing. Asanas bring about mental and emotional equanimity by slowing down the breathing and deepening the inhalation and exhalation.

5. Awareness is an essential feature in the practice of asanas. While performing asanas one should be fully aware of what is being done and not allow the mind to wander here and there. Without awareness, asanas are not really asanas, no matter how well they may be performed physically. This awareness of breath movement while doing asanas draws attention away from entanglement with superficial worries and problems, at least for a period of time. This allows relaxation of one's personality. It may be temporary, but it assists in bringing about permanent changes in a person's mental and emotional makeup.

6. Emotional and mental attitudes and feelings are noticeably reflected in one's physical poise and expressions. When feeling angry, the shoulders tend to be hunched; when tense and worried, one frowns; when feeling nervous, one shakes and breathes quickly, and so on. Conversely, when happy, there is a simultaneous feeling of lightness and flexibility in the body. Significantly, this is also a two-way process – the body can induce corresponding changes in the mind. Asanas make the body relaxed, strong, light, supple, free of aches and pains and this in turn brings about emotional and mental calmness and confidence.

7. Asanas are also effective in the elimination of diseases. This alone is conducive to mental and emotional stability. For example, constipation; this ailment is generally accepted by medical science to be initially caused by mental tension, although there are other factors such as lack of exercise and unsuitable food habits. Additionally, when a person suffers

from constipation there is a feeling of heaviness, not only in the body, but also in the mind. One's thinking processes become dulled and pessimistic. Asanas help to remove constipation so that one simultaneously becomes more light-hearted and carefree. By removing or easing physical ailments, asanas bring about a corresponding relaxation and freedom of one's personality.

All these factors interact with each other. The overall result is a notable and positive change in one's subconscious and conscious thinking processes.

How do asanas release mental tensions?

Swami Satyananda: The mind and body are not separate entities, although there is a tendency to think and act as though they are. The gross form of the mind is the body and the subtle form of the body is the mind. The practice of asana integrates and harmonizes the two. Both the body and the mind harbour tensions or knots. Every mental knot has a corresponding physical, muscular knot and vice versa.

The aim of asana is to release these knots. Asanas release mental tensions by dealing with them on the physical level, acting somato-psychically, through the body to the mind. For example, emotional tensions and suppression can tighten up and block the smooth functioning of the lungs, diaphragm and breathing process, contributing to debilitating illnesses in the form of respiratory disorders.

Muscular knots can occur anywhere in the body: for example, tightness in the neck as cervical spondylitis, or in the face as neuralgia. A well chosen set of asanas, combined with pranayama, shatkarmas, meditation and yoga nidra, is most effective in eliminating these knots, tackling them from both the mental and physical levels. The result is the release of dormant energy; the body becomes full of vitality and strength, and the mind becomes light, creative, joyful and balanced.

Regular practice of asana maintains the physical body in an optimum condition and promotes health, even in

an unhealthy body. Through asana practice, the dormant energy potential is released and experienced as increased confidence in all areas of life.

What is the relationship of body and mind in the practice of asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: What is the concept of asana? It is a posture that is comfortable and steady – this means that in the practise of asana there is a relationship of body with mind. By doing contortions, by training the body and putting it in certain postures, does the body become steady and comfortable? No, in order to make the physical body steady and comfortable there must be a process by which the mind can also be made steady and comfortable.

The mental state reflects on the body and the physical state of experience reflects on the mind. So asana is not just the physical posture, it is also the mental posture. It is a state of mind, an altered state of mind, in which the practitioner can remain one-pointed and steady. One must be able to stop the fluctuations of the mind and be comfortable in that state.

Therefore yoga has always made this statement, that asanas alone are enough to alter the state of consciousness; this is why a physical posture is as important as meditation. The general theory is that meditation is a mental process and physically one can be in any posture and one need not worry about that aspect. That is alright, it is acceptable. But when one enters the serious practice of dhyana, it requires the steadiness of the posture, the sense of being comfortable in the posture, the willpower plus the creativity – so all the time there is the linking of body and mind. This is the physical aspect of yoga.

Why do the yoga texts always emphasize stability and comfort in asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: By knowing the principles for managing the conditions of the body – not to obtain health, but to manage the conditions of the body – one is freed

from the obsessive nature and can become aware of the subtle nature. It is awareness of the subtle nature which is the focal point of yogic philosophies. Whether it be the *Yoga Sutras* of Sage Patanjali, *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, *Gheranda Samhita*, or any other yoga text, asanas are prescribed to bring about balance in the body, to purify it and harmonize its functions, but the emphasis is always placed on stability, awareness and the feeling of comfort. The definition of asana in the *Yoga Sutras* simply says that asanas are postures in which one is *sthira*, stable, and in which *sukha*, pleasure, is experienced.

Stability is a condition of the physical body and pleasure is a condition of the mind. Pleasure is not a condition of the body, it is a condition of the mind. For this reason asanas tend to work at both the physical and mental levels by providing physical stability, relieving imbalances, stresses and tensions, and by creating a change in the mental perspective, attitude and understanding towards the physical body. This brings adaptation and adjustment with the physical body so that there is a sense of pleasure, joy, contentment and happiness. This leads to freedom from the compulsive nature of thoughts, of brooding over the same things again and again.

How does the daily practice of asana help to integrate body and mind?

Swami Satyananda: Throughout the world, lack of discipline has become a major problem in every phase of life, and yogasana will play a major role in containing this difficulty. Taking into consideration the present time and need, the following definition of yoga is applicable: yoga is a definite method for physical, mental, emotional and spiritual development, as yoga improves, strengthens and develops both the body and mind. Through yoga, one can discipline the body and mind.

The man who is unable to observe individual discipline will not understand the meaning of social discipline or be able

to follow it. Sage Patanjali starts his *Yoga Sutras* with: *Atha yogah anushasanam*; Therefore, complete discipline is yoga.

Everyone wishes his body and mind to be fit and efficient. Yogasanas are postures to keep both the body and mind healthy. If the body is unhealthy, the mind will be unhealthy. The first benefit of yogic postures is sound physical health. To achieve this, regular practice of yogasanas is essential.

There are many postures which can be practised, but initially one should practise for only ten to fifteen minutes daily. All the systems of the body will begin to function normally with regular practise of yogasanas. Change takes place in the adrenal system, the thyroids, the pancreas and other vital endocrinal glands. Proper and regulated control, training and expression of these glands brings about change: just as food is essential to nourish the body and generate energy, different postures are required for the healthy functioning of the muscles, bones, joints and nerves.

The daily practice of yogasanas reduces muscular and nervous tensions, rectifies and improves digestive function, removes lethargy and laziness, and keeps one active and efficient throughout the day. When the body and mind are light and free of tension, more physical and mental work can be done. Asanas guard against the inner disorders of the body and provide strength and health.

What is the effect on the mind of practising asanas regularly?

Swami Satyananda: It is the view of yogis and many psychologists that various mental diseases such as neurosis, neurasthenia, insomnia, etc., can be successfully cured by yogic asanas. If a range of yogasanas are practised it reduces decay of both the body and the mind. It keeps one young and one attains complete equilibrium of body and mind.

Today man has to face tensions everywhere, in all spheres of life, as the world is so full of tensions. Through yoga therapy, yogasanas keep the body and mind in tune, in coordination. Along with sound physical health, it is equally

important and essential to have perfect mental equilibrium and steadiness. These are the natural outcome of asanas. Yoga practices quickly correct the mental personality. For example, short temper, anger, mental agitation, mental depression, unsatisfied nature and all other mental complexes.

This is a gradual process which can be sped up by regular practice. Mental capacities increase and the mind gradually becomes sound, steady and subtle. Yoga has given definite and positive results to millions. That is the secret behind its continuity and the reason yoga is still flourishing in spite of major historical changes over tens of thousands of years.

What effect does breath synchronization in asanas have on the mind?

Swami Niranjanananda: Asanas have subtle effects on the body, including a change in the breathing process. During the practice of asanas the habit of taking slow, deep breaths is developed. This, in turn, helps one to achieve mental and emotional balance. The first aim of practising asanas is to relieve physical and mental distress.

ASANAS AND THE PRANIC BODY

How does asana practice affect the flow of prana?

Swami Satyananda: Hatha yoga is a process through which purification and control of the body take place by restructuring the pranic flows. The hatha yogis also found that by developing control of the body through asana, the mind is controlled. Therefore, asana practice is foremost in hatha yoga. When asana is practised, steadiness develops. Prana moves freely and there is less chance of disease occurring. Just as stagnant water is the breeding ground for all sorts of creatures, when prana stagnates anywhere in the body, conditions are perfect for bacteria to flourish; prana should move like swift flowing water.

When prana flows freely, the body also becomes supple. Stiffness of the body is due to blockages and an accumulation of toxins. When prana begins to flow the toxins are removed from the system and one can bend and stretch in a relaxed manner without having to do vigorous warming up exercises. It is stated in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:17):

*Hathasya prathamaangatvaadaasanam poorvamuchyate.
Kuryaattadaasanam sthairyamaarogyam chaangalaaghavam.*

Prior to everything, asana is spoken of as the first part of hatha yoga. Having done asana one gets steadiness of body and mind, diseaselessness and lightness of the limbs.

When the store of prana is increased to a greater degree, the body will move by itself. One may find oneself spontaneously performing asanas and various bodily postures, mudras or even pranayama. One may find oneself performing postures that could never have been done before. This is due to a relaxed state and to a greater vibrational rate of the prana.

What effect do yoga asanas have on the energy channels in the body?

Swami Satyananda: The central nervous system is the reservoir of all energy. There are latent centres in the body that are inactive and need to be activated. Asanas can help with this to some extent. Though said to be eighty-four in number, the principal asanas are few.

According to yoga anatomy, the major pranic channel, *sushumna*, passes through the spinal column. Of the fourteen principal nadis, the main three are ida, pingala and sushumna, all of which are situated within the spinal column. Asanas keep the spinal column supple and toned, enabling the seeker to release energy through the psychic passage within it.

The most important asanas for the spine are backward bending, forward bending, twisting and inverted postures.

What is meant by the release of energy blocks through practising asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: The postures, by stretching and exercising the muscles, tissues, bones and various other parts and organs of the body, release energy blocks in the physiological structure. Many people find it difficult to understand what an energy block is. It can probably be best explained as tension or stress in any specific part of the body. Energy blocks can be experienced anywhere in the body; the muscular system, nervous system, skeletal system or any other organ or part.

Acupuncture has been shown to work; there might be a pain in the head but it can be relieved if needles are stuck in certain parts of the body. Pain is muscular or nervous, so by sticking needles into the body how can a muscular or nervous pain be eliminated? The needles rechannel the flow of energy and the muscles, nerves, and whole system are affected, bringing relief. Recognition of the energy rechanneling effect of acupuncture on the muscular or nervous systems, or internal organs, helps us to understand how yoga postures naturally bring the body into a state of equilibrium and balance.

What happens when pranic blocks are removed?

Swami Satyananda: *Prana*, vital energy, which corresponds to *ki* or *chi* in Chinese medicine, pervades the whole body. *Prana* follows flow patterns, called *nadis*, which are responsible for maintaining individual cellular activity. Stiffness of the body is due to blocked *prana* and a subsequent accumulation of toxins. When *prana* begins to flow, the toxins are removed from the system, ensuring the health of the whole body.

As the body becomes supple, postures which seemed impossible become easy to perform, and steadiness and grace of movement develop. When the amount of *prana* is significantly increased, the body moves into certain postures by itself and *asanas*, *mudras* and *pranayamas* occur spontaneously.

What is the role of asanas in balancing ida and pingala nadis?

Swami Satyananda: Asanas in general tend to balance ida and pingala nadis, especially if they are done in a systematic manner, correctly, and as a part of a regular practice program. This is not really surprising, since most asanas have a symmetrical influence on all parts of the body.

Most tend to apply equal pressure to the armpits where there is a pressure point that directly affects the flows of ida and pingala. Also, if asanas are done correctly, the eyes will be closed and the mind will be fixed on the breath, an inner symbol, or some other suitable object which is introverting, thereby strengthening the flow of ida. At the same time there will be a degree of extroversion in order to execute and maintain the physical position of the asana; in this manner, the pingala aspect is simultaneously included. This generally balances ida and pingala, without too much extroversion or conversely too much absorption in mental and psychic fantasies.

It is for this reason that asanas, when perfected, are indeed meditative techniques. It is also another reason why asanas are so useful in bringing about good health, however, this effect is usually overlooked when trying to explain how asanas bring about benefits.

How do yogasanas affect the chakras?

Swami Satyananda: The main purpose of asanas is to stimulate the psychic centres of the body. Their influence is of a psychic and spiritual nature, not a physical one. When yogasanas are practised a mild awakening occurs in the chakras, thereby initiating an act of evolution in one's spiritual and mental life, as chakras are the connection or link between the physical and spiritual existence. They are part of kundalini yoga as taught in the tantra shastras.

These six chakras are psychic centres which progressively awaken as the human being evolves from a gross level of understanding to a higher form of knowledge. It is believed that there are also lower chakras which the individual being

or *jiva* has passed through during incarnations of animal existence. But now, in the human birth, the evolution of consciousness begins by moving from mooladhara to swadhisthana, through manipura to anahata, thence to vishuddhi and ajna.

These chakras represent the psycho-spiritual evolution of the individual, and when there is slight awakening in them it means one's individuality is moving slightly forward. With a dramatic awakening in the chakras one's consciousness is rapidly and forcefully accelerated to move further on the path of evolution. It needs to be made perfectly clear that yogasanas are immediately responsible for the growth of one's personality and basic structure of mind.

Each and every yoga posture has an important effect on the chakras. When one practises bhujangasana, or matsyasana, or sirshasana, or sarvangasana, something is definitely taking place. The chakras are becoming more active. Therefore, students of yoga are always advised to perform a definite set of physical asanas to ensure perfect balance among the various currents in the body such as the physical, psychic, nervous and subtle flows.

ASANAS IN SPIRITUAL LIFE

Should one persevere if asana practice is difficult?

Swami Sivananda: The practice of asanas is of vital importance, and though the practice may be found painful and troublesome at the outset, once the habit of sitting in one asana for a considerable length of time is formed, a peculiar thrill and pleasure will be felt while seated there, and the meditator will not want to change the pose on any account.

When should meditation take priority over asana practice?

Swami Nirananjananda: What one thinks, how one acts, and the ultimate result are all interrelated. Therefore, asanas have been given equal importance to pratyahara and dhyana

techniques within the practices of yoga. They all have to be practised and perfected. One cannot say, “I will excel in meditation and not practise asanas.” Neither can one say, “I will practise only asanas, I do not need to practise pratyahara or dharana or dhyana”. There comes a time when asanas lead naturally and spontaneously into meditation, through the states of pratyahara and dharana and even pranayama. There also comes a time when one experiences one’s own psyche in deep states of meditation, and the body begins to perform asanas spontaneously.

What type of asanas did the sages of ancient times practise?

Swami Satyananda: The yogic tradition says that in all, there are eighty-four lakh of asanas (8,400,000), i.e. there are as many asanas as forms of life. In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:18), Yogi Swatmarama describes “some” of these asanas – those which are essential, and which were performed by the founders of hatha yoga:

*Vashishthaadyaishcha munibhirmatsyendraadyaishcha yogibhih.
Angeekritaanyaasanaani kathyante kaanichinmayaa.*

I will proceed to describe some of the asanas accepted by munis such as Vasishtha and yogis such as Matsyendranath.

Asanas were developed to evolve the consciousness from the lowest to the highest state. Therefore, some asanas imitate the shapes of the bow or boat; plants like trees and the lotus; reptiles, fish, the foetus, birds, saints like Sage Vasishtha and gods such as Nataraja.

It is interesting that Yogi Swatmarama should include asanas practised by munis such as Sage Vasishtha. It is natural that he would discuss those performed by Yogi Matsyendranath as he is the founder of this hatha yoga system, but Sage Vasishtha was a jnana yogi, so it can be assumed that he would have mainly used sitting and meditative asanas rather than the more dynamic postures.

Mentioning Sage Vasishtha shows that even those concerned with contemplation and higher wisdom realized the necessity of yogasana. It also implies that the influence of asanas is more than physical. If asanas are named after saints such as Sage Vasishtha who became honoured as jnanis, asanas must also be beneficial in the development of higher wisdom. The sloka seems to infer that whether one is specifically practising hatha or any other form of yoga, asana is important and should be incorporated.

How do asanas prepare one for higher practices such as pranayama and meditation?

Swami Sivananda: Asana is the third limb of yoga. If one is firmly established in asanas, the body will not be felt at all. When the body is not felt, the qualities of the pairs of opposites, such as heat and cold, pleasure and pain, have no effect. When one is free from the effect of the pairs of opposites one is able to take up the next step, namely, pranayama, and practice it with an unruffled mind.

When ready, select a posture which is easy and comfortable and which can be held for a long time, say, three hours. In the *Bhagavad Gita* (6:11–13) Sri Krishna says:

*Shuchau deshe pratishthaapya sthiramaasanamaatmanah.
Naatyuchchhritam naatineechem chailaajinakushottaram.*

*Tatraikaagram manah kritvaa yatchittendriyakriyah.
Upavishyaasane yunjyaadyogamaatmavishuddhaye.*

*Samam kaayashirogreevam dhaarayannachalam sthirah.
Samprekshya naasikaagram svam dishashchaanavalokayan.*

In a clean spot, having established a firm seat of his own, neither too high nor too low, made of a cloth, a skin and kush grass, one over the other. (11)

There, having made the mind one-pointed, with the actions of the mind and the senses controlled, let him, seated on the seat, practise yoga for the purification of the self. (12)

Let him firmly hold his body, head and neck erect and still, gazing at the tip of his nose, without looking around. (13)

In these verses Sri Krishna describes the asana and the *drishti*, gaze. Meditation cannot be practised without a firm seat. If the body is unsteady, the mind will also become unsteady. There is an intimate connection between the body and the mind. The body should not shake even a bit. Mastery over the asana should be attained by daily practice. The body should be as firm as a statue or a rock. If the body, head and neck are kept erect, the spinal cord will also be erect and the kundalini will rise up steadily through the sushumna nadi.

One should sit in *padmasana*, the lotus pose, or *siddhasana*, the accomplished pose. This helps maintain nervous equilibrium and mental poise.

How does one know which meditation asana to use?

Swami Satyananda: In order to become perfect, steady and comfortable in the asana which has been selected for meditation, tension and effort have to be overcome. There should be relaxation of effort; there should be perfect relaxation in the asana. In Sage Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* (2:47) it states:

Prayatnashaithilyaananantasamaapattibhyaam

By loosening of effort and by meditation on the serpent ananta, asana is mastered.

The term, 'loosening of effort' means that one should not struggle or apply any force. The asana must be perfectly relaxed and without any muscular or nervous tension. Therefore, whichever asana one is able to practise without effort, such as *siddhasana* or *padmasana* or *swastikasana*, should be taken up for meditation.

Why is it important to practise asanas prior to meditation?

Swami Niranjanananda: Asanas prepare the body for perfection of pratyahara. Pranayamas also prepare the body for perfection of pratyahara. The preparatory practices for pratyahara cannot be ignored; one cannot go straight into the practice of pratyahara, one has to start with gradual adjustment of the body and gradual harmonization between the body and mind.

One cannot expect harmony to happen instantaneously and this is an important point which people all over the world have missed. They think that meditation is a final, ultimate and powerful tool and they ignore asana and pranayama. They sit down for meditation, practise it for many years but still they are in the same square that they started in, nothing changes in their life. However, if the sequence which has been described in yoga is followed, then heads can definitely be held high with hopes soaring.

What influence do asanas have on the subtle levels of being?

Swami Satyananda: When describing the benefits of asanas there is a tendency to oversimplify. In books, the concrete benefits that are attributed to each asana, though definitely valid, only scratch the surface. The vast benefits that can be obtained from asanas are being undersold. The benefits are usually confined to a list of physical effects and pointing out the parts of the body that are specifically influenced.

These benefits are true enough, but asanas act to a far greater depth. They don't actually affect specific parts of the body to the exclusion of all other parts. Every asana has positive and harmonious repercussions on the whole being of the practitioner. They do act on the gross and easily perceivable physical body, but far more importantly in relation to maintaining or improving health and removing disease, they act on the psychic, or pranic body, and the personal mind.

It is the influence on these far more subtle aspects of being that result in the main benefits of asanas, but these more subtle planes cannot be discussed in concrete terms, they have to be experienced. It is imbalance in the flow of prana and mental disharmony that are the root causes of disease, and asanas help to harmonize both these spheres.

Asanas don't really act in a specific sense, they act in a total sense. That is, they tend to harmonize the entire subtle instrument of the individual being. This in turn helps to rapidly bring about vibrant health, or at least improved health. Of course, more could be said about the effects on the mind and the pranic body, but the relationships and interactions are extremely subtle, and any attempt to be specific only leads to gross generalization and eventually more confusion.

This is why descriptions of the benefits of asana practice are usually limited to direct physical effects, such as massage and stretching the nerves. It must be remembered, however, that the greatest and more profound benefits come through the influence of the asanas on the pranic and mental bodies, and it is these influences that can bring about remarkable improvements in one's overall health and attitude towards life.

Think of an iceberg: only the part that lies above the waves of the sea is visible, but the greatest bulk of the iceberg lies unseen, submerged in the depths of the sea. It is the same with one's individuality; only the physical body can be seen, but most of one's being lies unseen in the subtle layers of the pranic and mental bodies. It is this hidden aspect, the majority of the total, which has the greatest control and influence on one's health, mode and experience of life.

During the practice of asanas, it is only the physical manipulations that are seen. Yet while practising asanas – assuming they are performed correctly with awareness and relaxation – there are vast harmonizing processes occurring below the normal levels of perception, in the mind and

pranic body. These are the most important revitalizing influences of asanas, yet also the least obvious.

It is only with increased awareness that one becomes more and more familiar with these processes. The pranic flows become harmonized. These are the intermediaries between the mind and the physical body, and have a controlling influence on the processes occurring within the physical body. They are very real; they only seem unreal as they cannot be perceived in normal states of awareness.

To do asanas correctly, there must be awareness. This leads to relaxation of the subconscious mind and the eventual purging of mental conflicts. The mind is also acted on through the physical body. The physical practice induces harmonious flows of nerve energy, breathing, heartbeat and so forth. These in turn help to harmonize the pranic flows within the pranic body, which in turn helps to calm the mind.

The physical, pranic and mental bodies are only arbitrary classifications. They don't really exist as watertight compartments. They are part of the same totality of individual existence. It is only through limited awareness that one sees oneself as mainly a physical body with an accumulation of a few thoughts. The being of an individual extends from the physical, through the pranic and into the mental. And even much deeper again beyond limitation and definition.

It is accepted that there is far more to an iceberg than the part that protrudes above the water. The totality is both above and below the sea. The totality of the iceberg is both visible and not visible. It is the same with individual existence; the physical body is the only part that most people see. In states of higher awareness these other realms can be perceived.

How do asanas influence the deeper realms of one's being?

Swami Satyananda: It must be pointed out and emphasized that asanas act on deeper spheres of the individual being.

Although they are predominantly physical in nature, they have positive harmonious effects on the more subtle realms of one's being. Most of the control and influence on the physical body comes from the more subtle layers, but there is also a feedback so that the physical aspect influences the subtler spheres.

Just as changes to the visible part of an iceberg affect the submerged portion, the direct action of asanas on the physical body has repercussions in deeper realms which are beyond normal perception. This is the important point to remember. Asanas affect the mind, psychic body and physical body. One may not be aware of the subtle influences, but they take place.

Therefore, when the benefits of asanas are listed, remember that far more is implied. Every asana has an influence on one's whole individuality. This even applies to the simplest asana. It is unrealistic to define rigid boundaries where asanas work and don't work, give benefits and don't give benefits. They affect and help to harmonize the whole being.

Specific benefits are given only because they are obvious due to the physical nature of the asanas, can be easily felt and can be easily described. But the deeper benefits take place way beyond the level of perception of most people. They must be experienced individually: when reading the benefits that are described in books, remember that there is much, much more that isn't mentioned.

What type of asanas are described in the Yoga Upanishads?

Swami Niranjanananda: The asanas described in the Yoga Upanishads aim to awaken the kundalini. Therefore, the selection of asanas given in the upanishadic texts is limited. Although the practice of both major and simple asanas is described, the thrust is to go deep into the psychic experience through the medium of the body. So the practices are not just physical movements. A distinct effort is made in each posture to try and experience what is happening at the subtle levels of the body.

Of the vast variety of asanas that have been described, thirteen are considered important in the Yoga Upanishads: vajrasana, gomukhasana, veerasana, simhasana, sukhasana, swastikasana, siddhasana, padmasana, kukkutasana, mayurasana, chakrasana, koormasana and poorna dhanurasana. These are the major asanas, basic as well as advanced, which are described in the upanishadic texts as postures that influence the physiological condition and help to induce deep meditative states.

Their aim is the awakening of kundalini. They also open and awaken the chakras and nadis, with the purpose of developing one-pointed concentration of mind. With this aim in mind, the rishis selected practices which could provide physical stability and open up the psychic body, enabling the prana to flow more evenly to all the different organs and areas, creating stimulation and increased sensation at the chakra level and preparing the entire system for the rising of kundalini.

What is the place of advanced asanas in spiritual awakening?

Swami Satyananda: One reaches a stage where the practice of routine asanas should be reduced and difficult ones must be practised. New asanas appear difficult for some time, but as one goes on practising them, they become easy. Vrishchika, kandapida, yogamudra, utkat, etc., are peculiar asanas. Yogasana is the means to siddhi.

How do asanas help awaken the kundalini?

Swami Satyananda: The ultimate purpose of yoga is the awakening of *kundalini shakti*, the evolutionary energy in each individual. Practising asanas stimulates the chakras, distributing the generated energy of kundalini all over the body. About thirty-five asanas are specifically geared to this purpose including chakrasana for manipura chakra, sarvangasana for vishuddhi, and sirshasana for sahasrara. The other asanas regulate and purify the nadis, facilitating the conduction of prana throughout the body.

The main object of hatha yoga is to create balance between the interacting activities and processes of the pranic and mental forces. Once this has been achieved, the impulses generated give a call of awakening to *sushumna nadi*, the central pathway in the spine, through which the kundalini energy ascends to sahasrara chakra, thereby illumining the higher centres of human consciousness. Hatha yoga, therefore, not only strengthens the body and improves health, but also activates and awakens the higher centres responsible for the evolution of human consciousness.



3

Asana Sadhana

PRACTISING ASANA

Is asana an essential part of yoga sadhana?

Swami Satyananda: This is an important question as unfortunately in India as well as in the west, yoga is more or less regarded as a form of physical culture, divested of all its psychological and spiritual significance. This perception is due to an exaggerated emphasis on the yoga asanas. Hatha yoga practices provide a preliminary background for progress in yoga but they are not an indispensable component of yoga sadhana. While a strong body is an asset, a weak body is not always a handicap. There are instances in the history of yoga where the yogic ultimate has been achieved while dispensing with the practices of hatha yoga.

Nevertheless, regular asana practice is definitely recommended for everyone. One of the aims of this movement is to popularize the use and benefits of asanas in the daily life of men, women and children. Asanas, however, should be accorded their proper place in the background of yoga.

Where does yoga practice begin?

Swami Niranjanananda: When one begins yoga, it is not with difficult practices like the headstand, but with simple practices such as moving the fingers, toes, hands, wrists and arms, in order to gain a deeper understanding about the state of the

body, about the muscular, nervous and skeletal systems. In this way, one starts to know where there is stiffness, where there is tightness, and how best to remove that stiffness and tightness. This gradual working with the body leads to the discovery of the body, which is the main object in the physical aspect of yoga.

How can asana be used for harmonious development of the body?

Swami Sivananda: There should be a harmonious development of all the muscles of the body, the organs, nerves and frame. Some people try to develop the chest and the arms only; some try to develop only the lower limbs and the chest. To develop certain parts of the body at the expense of the rest of the body is irrational and unscientific.

General health must be maintained. For this, there must be symmetrical development of all parts of the body. The muscles of the extremities or limbs, chest, back, neck, abdomen, etc., should be developed equally. Only then will there be grace, elegance and beauty. Another important point is that there must be no violent exertion.

How does one determine which asanas to practise?

Swami Satyananda: It is not necessary or possible to practise all the asanas. There are different results from different sets of practices, so the appropriate set must be chosen to match the purpose. By practising a particular series of yoga exercises, spiritual awareness may develop. If practising yoga simply to keep the body fit, a different selection is needed. If yoga is practised to bring relaxation, an entirely different asana program must be followed, and for meditation, there is yet another set.

Should yoga students practice asanas according to the traditional scriptures?

Swami Niranjanananda: The traditional scriptures of yoga describe advanced asanas. In *Gheranda Samhita*, for example, major asanas like mayurasana, sarvangasana or paschi-

mottanasana have been described. However, before these asanas can be attempted, the body has to be brought to a state where it can benefit from the practice of such asanas. For this, there are two stages. The first stage is the process and the second stage is perfection.

The scriptures have described the perfection aspect but each person's physical nature must be considered. Some people are young, some old, some flexible, some stiff, some fat, and others are thin. For those with certain physical conditions it is not possible to achieve absolute perfection in one asana immediately. First the corresponding changes have to be created, and the body prepared.

How should one prepare for the practice of major asanas?

Swami Niranjanananda: The general need when preparing the body for classical asanas is flexibility. If the body is stiff, rather than being able to practise an asana correctly, more stress and tension, which is harmful to the physical condition, is created in the body. Therefore, preparation of the body with asanas that bring flexibility is always advised.

The first two systems to work with are the skeletal system and the muscular system. When mobility and flexibility are developed, tensions, toxins, tightness and deformities of the joints and muscles are released and removed, and there is proper circulation, not only of blood, but also of prana shakti.

Body posture and pressure in different parts of the body can cause blockage of prana shakti just as there can be blockage of blood. Sometimes there is a reduction in the blood supply to various parts and organs, which is felt as numbness. When the posture is changed, sensations of blood flow and tingling are felt as sensitivity returns again to that part. Although prana shakti is much more subtle than blood, blockages do happen. Such blockages prevent the organ or area from being strong and active.

Asanas which provide flexibility are pawanmuktasana part one for the joints and muscles, pawanmuktasana part two for the lower back, hips, waist, spine and stomach area, the

trikonasana series for the spinal cord and major skeletal and muscular structures, and the shakti bandhas to coordinate the muscular movements of the body by stretching and releasing, expanding and contracting different muscles. These four major groups of asanas provide flexibility and relieve stress, tightness and tensions from the musculoskeletal system. They are recommended when aiming to perfect major yoga asanas whether for a spiritual or therapeutic purpose.

Why should asanas be practised slowly?

Swami Niranjanananda: An important point to remember is that both awareness and breath have to follow the movement of the body when the postures are practised. No movement should be an unconscious movement, every action must be a conscious action. Only in this manner can the mind's ability to recognize its own natural condition be developed. Therefore, when practising asanas ensure that the principles of *sthirata*, steadiness, and *sukha*, comfort are followed. Sage Patanjali has defined asana as *sthiram sukham asanam*. If asana deviates from this concept of stability and comfort, it becomes gymnastics, it's not asana anymore. For this reason, the rhythm and speed of asana has to be regulated to provide all-round benefits.

There are many asanas available – what is a simple, balanced asana sadhana for daily life?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are thousands of postures. Can anyone practise all of them? Remembering that on the shelf there are many medicines but only one needs to be taken, practices must be chosen according to the physical need and requirement. With only four or five asanas the physical body can be looked after. Within all the possible movements of the body, there are only four or five major movements. Each morning one asana for each of these possible movements should be performed; this creates a yogic capsule for the health of the body's structure.

This capsule is suitable for people who are involved in the world and have obligations and responsibilities to the

family and society. Such people need a yoga practice that is limited to techniques which can be performed and practised in the shortest possible time, postures which free the body of tightness and tension and move the energy in the body. The following sadhana fulfils these requirements.

One movement of the body is stretching, traction. The practice of *tadasana*, the palm tree pose, is an excellent asana for traction, for it stretches and elongates the whole body, releasing tension from each and every joint. It is especially useful for people who have to sit a lot, as when one sits a lot the spine becomes tired. Sitting a lot on a chair in the office, car or home, the lower back begins to be bothered. Reading, driving or working at a table creates shoulder and neck problems, as the spinal cord remains crooked. The spine is like the main pillar of the house: if it is crooked there won't be any strength in the house, and the house becomes more susceptible to damage and weakness. Structural weakness manifests in the form of aches and pains, and skeletal and bone problems. Tadasana is also a good practice to keep the body aligned, to free up pressure on the joints, and to allow free circulation of blood and prana shakti to flow in the body. Therefore, tadasana is practice number one according to the stretching movement of the body.

Another type of movement is the lateral stretch. The practice for this is *tiryak tadasana*, the palm tree pose. In this practice one side of the body is contracted and the other side is extended. Contraction and expansion of the lateral muscles takes place and side muscles which are rarely used in day to day activities are stretched. Stiffness of the sides and the sides of the back can be managed effectively with this asana. It is also a good practice to help realign the spinal cord, to lessen the pressures on the discs between the vertebra, to help lower back problems and to manage conditions like slipped disc and sciatica. Tiryak tadasana is the second most important asana.

A third type of movement is twisting the spine. The posture for this is *kati chakrasana*, the waist rotating pose.

When clothes are washed and the water has to be removed, the cloth is twisted and squeezed to remove the excess water. In kati chakrasana similar twisting takes place in the body, affecting the large and small intestines and the stomach. Toxins are removed from the digestive system, the twist provides more flexibility to the back muscles and increased mobility to the waist and hips which generally become weak as pressure is often put on this region. Kati chakrasana is the third asana to be performed in the morning.

The fourth asana is *surya namaskara*, salutations to the sun, a sequence of twelve postures involving forward and backward bending movements, as well as stretching and toning many major muscles, joints and organs.

The fifth asana should be an inverted posture. One inverted posture should be practised in order to reverse the force of gravity. Twenty-four hours a day the feet get heavy and the head gets lighter. So for five minutes in twenty-four hours, try to make the head heavier and feet lighter. *Sirshasana*, the headstand pose, *sarvangasana*, the shoulder stand pose, or *vipareeta karani asana*, the inverted pose, can be used, but not without learning and proper guidance. A teacher should decide which kind of inverted posture is useful for the individual student.

These five postures are more than enough to provide complete wellbeing and health to the body for a normal person. After completing these five asanas one is free to incorporate any other asana but these five asanas are strongly recommended as a basic routine. If they are practised regularly and continuously over a period of time, a definite transformation in the flexibility and adaptability of the body will be felt. To do these five practises takes about fifteen minutes.

Should one be aware of relaxation or action when practising asanas?

Swami Niranjanananda: The two modes, action and relaxation, are used whenever any of the yogasanas are performed.

For example, when entering *bhujangasana*, the cobra pose, the whole body, from the top of the head to the tip of the toes, is brought into a state of awareness through the experience of action: lying on the stomach, raising the upper body while arching the spine, and finally pausing in the final position. Then as the asana is released, one returns to the floor, and a feeling and awareness of relaxation spreads through the whole body.

How can the full potential of asanas be realized?

Swami Niranjanananda: How are the asanas to be practised? Swami Satyananda always said that five things have to be combined: movement, breath, mantra, chakra and awareness. Movement means the movement of the body, such as forward, backward, or twisting. With that movement, the breathing is synchronized. With the breathing, mantra is mentally repeated. With the mantra, the awareness is taken to a particular chakra. And awareness, the fifth component enables the synchronization of the movement, breath, mantra and chakra whilst remaining aware of what is happening. The combination of these five is the beginning of asana as a sadhana.

Practising asana in this way makes a yoga class, not just physical movement. After such a class one does not say, “Oh I had good exercise today, my body feels good.” No: because the intent and the purpose of yoga is not exercise.

What is perfection in asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: A good philosophy in life is to start from the basics. From childhood, always start from the basics, always be ready to relearn. With this mentality, one can excel in yoga. Here is an example from *pawanmuktasana* part one. *Manibandha chakra*, wrist rotation. The hand is made into a fist and the wrist is rotated clockwise; many people do this practice but few perfect it. Perfection in this asana is when a coin is placed on the wrist and does not fall with the movement, or the face of a wrist watch does not move. When

both hands are rotated and coins are placed on both hands, the coins should remain perfectly still.

What is the purpose of perfecting asana? If it is only an exercise, it can be done in any way – the wrist can twist and turn and do anything, but if it is done as yoga, there has to be control over the muscle movement, there has to be control over the ligaments, there has to be awareness of what one is doing, as the effect of asana is to give one subtle control over the body and subtle control over the mind. That is perfection.

Is perfection of asana a physical state?

Swami Niranjanananda: Four different physical states have to be experienced before an asana can be perfected. The first is awareness of the normal physical posture to which the body is accustomed. The second is creation of flexibility in the body. The third is adjustment of the internal systems with the posture so that there is no pain or tension. The fourth is concentration of the mind in the asana, which leads to perfect stillness and relaxation.

How should one's awareness be expanded during asana practice?

Swami Niranjanananda: Swami Satyananda has emphasized subtle awareness during yoga practice. This is the main difference between the Satyananda system and other systems of yoga. The body is used to access the mind. Prana is used to access the consciousness. The entire yoga is used to access inner spiritual harmony and balance.

The secret of yoga is that one's performance has to be identified with the mind. No movement should be done unconsciously. Even if it is pawanmuktasana, the mind must be in the movement. The mind should observe each and every experience, every movement that takes place – not only in the clenching of the fists but all along the arm. The breath should be coordinated, awareness should be combined with movement, focus and concentration should be present. The body and mind should function as one unit.

Asanas are not just mechanical; the component of awareness must be added whilst performing the asana. Only then can the asana be realized. This awareness, when it deepens, takes one to the subtle layer of prana and then to other subtle layers of the mind. By following an integrated program of asana, pranayama and meditation, it is discovered that these three groups of practices have a lot to offer. Concentration, awareness and relaxation are integral parts of asana and when they are combined while performing an asana, the true and intended experience of asana will be closer.

Postures should not be performed with a jerk. They are controlled movements, done slowly with awareness, to provide maximum movement and stretch to the body. Initially yoga is taught very simply – one does not start with headstand. Learning yoga starts with practices like moving the fingers, toes, hands, wrists and arms so that a deeper understanding of the muscular, nervous and skeletal systems is gained. Where is there stiffness, where is there tightness? And how best can that stiffness and tightness be moved? It is this gradual working of the body that leads to new discoveries about the body. This discovery, or rediscovery, of the body is the main object of the physical aspects of yoga.

Awareness of the body means having an awareness of the movement being made and the different areas where this movement has an effect. If it is creating pain, there is awareness of that. This expanded awareness of the body helps remove physiological blocks, areas of tension. The body is always in a state of tension. Even during sleep at night, some areas of the body, the muscles and the joints are in a state of tension. There may be postural defects such as round shoulders, or problems in the knees and legs due to bad posture or other reasons. When one sleeps at night, the pain continues. Due to arthritis, stiffness and pain are always there, even in bed, creating tension in the body. This tension affects the performance of the brain. That imbalance, the hyperactivity within the brain, in turn influences the mind.

Through the practice of asanas the muscles are gradually released from tension. The nervous system is made to relax and total realignment of the body takes place. This is the aim of the physical aspect of yoga: when the body is balanced, free from stress and tension, one experiences health, vitality and fluidity in motion and in action. When this becomes the experience, then according to yoga, the body is healthy.

What range of experience can be had through the practice of asanas?

Swami Niranjanananda: The tradition maintains that the benefit achieved through the practice of asana is knowledge of the three dimensions. Any layperson trying to study traditional literature will begin to wonder how one can achieve knowledge of the three dimensions by the practice of asana. The three dimensions can be understood in any sense, such as physical, mental and spiritual; gross, subtle and causal; waking, dreaming and sleeping states, and so forth. However, looking at the different descriptions of the three dimensions it becomes apparent that these dimensions are best understood in terms of the koshas: annamaya, manomaya and pranamaya, as the extent of experience of the physical body is limited to these three dimensions, and asanas are physical in nature. These three dimensions must be looked at in turn.

1. *Annamaya kosha* is the physical aspect, the bones, muscles, nerves, blood circulation and the internal organs, such as the lungs, heart, kidneys, liver and pancreas. Everything that is physical in nature is included within annamaya kosha. The practice of asana is never unconscious or mechanical. It should always be done with awareness and concentration. For the practice of each asana, the yogis have described where one must concentrate, which chakras and what kind of sensation and feeling to be aware of, and also what kind of pain may be experienced. There is a wide range of experiences to observe and become aware of.

This faculty of awareness or observation increases sensitivity to one's body. Therefore, through the practice of asanas one first learns to observe the body – what the body needs. What type of stretch, what type of release does the muscular system need? What kind of tension underlies which system? Is there any disturbance in the physical body, what is the physical experience in the state of comfort, in the state of stillness and quietness? This in-depth awareness of the body is the first benefit of asana practice at the level of annamaya kosha.

2. *Manomaya kosha* is the mental aspect. At the level of manomaya kosha the effort made to still the mind is of great importance. While making a physical movement, awareness and an attempt to concentrate are made. One tries to practice *asana pratyahara* by withdrawing the mind from the distractions that pull it outside, and merging it with the physical posture. Asana pratyahara is the experience of manomaya kosha, where one begins to know the movement, nature, quality, strengths and weaknesses of the mind through the practice of asana.

3. *Pranamaya kosha* is the energy aspect. When the body and mind are attuned to each other, pranamaya kosha is definitely affected. This is because prana relates very much to physiological experiences such as muscular stiffness and tiredness, and pranic blocks are experienced in the physical body in the form of discomfort, energy depletion or disease. If there is dissipation of mind, one cannot be aware of this pranic energy or direct it into the right channels where it can become the tool for the awakening of the subtle and dormant potentials. Awareness of prana requires intense sensitivity of mind. If the mind is not sensitive enough, there cannot be an experience of prana. Without concentration and awareness there will be no experience of prana.

This knowledge of pranamaya kosha, which is awakened through the practice of asana, prepares the practitioner for the techniques of pranayama, which deal specifically with

the field of prana. Asana, therefore, becomes the stepping stone to the practice of pranayama. The purpose of asana is to remove the pranic blockages and regulate the flow of prana throughout the body. The purpose of pranayama is to awaken the pranas, and this is where the range of asana ends. This is the meaning of the statement from the Upanishads that knowledge of the three dimensions dawns through perfection of asana. To continue beyond this physical range, techniques of pranayama, pratyahara and dharana are required.

GENERAL GUIDELINES

What are the general rules and precautions for practising asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Some of the general rules and important precautions for practising yogasanas are:

- Asanas should be selected according to the individual state of health and capacity.
- For the prescription of asanas for oneself, consult a yoga teacher who has perfect knowledge of physiology, anatomy, flow of prana, and also psychology.
- The number and duration of asanas should gradually and slowly be increased.
- Asanas should be practised in the morning before taking breakfast.
- Diet, sleep and rest should be adjusted in order to reap the subtle benefits, and to avoid constipation.
- The room for asana practice should be clean and well-ventilated.
- To avoid accidents, practise away from fire, machines, fan, furniture, etc.
- Asanas should not be practised on the bare ground or floor; use a thick blanket or mat.
- After asanas, lie down in shavasana and rest. One can also lie in shavasana between asanas whenever there is any tiredness.

- Don't take a bath immediately after asanas. A bath should be taken at least fifteen minutes before asanas or half an hour after. After half an hour of asanas, one may take milk, fruits, or some pure and natural breakfast.
- For spiritual benefits, each posture should be done very slowly and for a longer time.

What is some advice for those starting out in asana practice?

Swami Sivananda: If the foundation of the building is not properly laid, the superstructure will fall down in no time. In the same way, if a yoga student has not gained mastery over the asanas, he cannot successfully proceed in a higher course of yogic practices. The steadier one is in asana, the more one is able to concentrate and make the mind one-pointed. Meditation cannot progress unless the posture is steady. One must be regular and systematic in one's practice and be a master of all the exercises that are done. During the practice, one's ishta or guru mantra can be repeated.

Another point to remember is that the amount of energy expended in these exercises should on no account strain one's system. Start by practising asanas for a minimum amount of time and gradually increase the period. Eventually, asanas can be done for as long as the posture can be comfortably held. Regularity in the practice is necessary if one wants to realize the maximum benefits of asanas. Generally, people practise for two months in the beginning with great interest and enthusiasm and then leave the practice. This is a sad mistake. In the beginning the asanas cannot be performed perfectly, but regular practice brings perfection; patience and perseverance, earnestness and sincerity are needed.

If a particular asana cannot be performed satisfactorily, do not lose heart. Where there is a will, there is a way. Rome was not built in a day. Remember the story of Bruce and the Spider. Try, try, try again. Continuous practice will bring satisfaction.

Observe moderation in eating, drinking, sleeping and in everything. The middle path is always good and safe. Observe the golden medium. Such a person soon becomes a yogi. *Sadachara*, pure conduct, *sadavichara*, right enquiry, and *satsanga*, good company, are necessary during the practice of yoga.

Are there any dietary rules for asana practitioners?

Swami Satyananda: There are no special dietary rules for asana practitioners, although it is better to eat natural food and in moderation. Contrary to popular belief, yoga does not say that a vegetarian diet is essential, although in the higher stages of practice it is recommended. At meal times it is advised to half fill the stomach with food, one quarter with water and leave the remaining quarter empty. Eat only to satisfy hunger and not so much that a feeling of heaviness or laziness occurs. Eat to live rather than live to eat.

Foods which cause acidity or gas in the digestive system, which are heavy, oily and spicy, should be avoided, especially when asanas are practised with a spiritual aim.

When are asanas contra-indicated?

Swami Satyananda: Asanas may be practised by people of all age groups, male and female. There are no specific limitations on the practice of asanas with regard to age or sex.

Asanas should not be practised during illness such as a cold or diarrhoea. At these times the body is directing its energy to specific areas to fight the illness; let it perform its duties unimpeded.

People with fractured bones or who are suffering from acute infections or backache, or chronic ailments and diseases such as stomach ulcer, tuberculosis, cardiac problems or hernia, and those recuperating from operations, should consult a competent yoga teacher or doctor before commencing asanas.

People who have specific conditions should not do certain asanas. For example, a person who has high blood

pressure should definitely not attempt inverted asanas, and people with slipped disc should not try forward bending asanas.

These are only the more obvious examples; there are many contra-indications which should be given by a teacher and are listed in instruction books.

If there is excessive pain in any part of the body, the asana should be terminated immediately and, if necessary, medical advice sought. If discomfort is felt one should not remain in an asana.

Is there an age limit to practising hatha yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Yoga can be practised at any age, whether it be 10, 20, 40, 60 or 80, as the practices begin gradually and are simple enough to exercise the different parts of the entire body. It is not necessary to practise advanced yoga like standing on one's head or performing intricate contortions. Asana is a practice through which one attains awareness of the body, releases tension and stress from different joints and muscles, and comes to a state of relaxation in which there is physical comfort in whatever is done.

What type of cleansing should be done before practising asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Try to take a cold shower before starting. This will greatly improve the effect of the asanas. If possible, do neti before commencing the practice.

PLACE OF PRACTICE

What is the best environment for asana practice?

Swami Satyananda: Practise in a well-ventilated room where it is calm and quiet. Asanas may also be practised outdoors, but the surroundings should be pleasant – a beautiful garden with trees and flowers, for example. Do not practise in a strong wind, in the cold, in air that is dirty, smoky or which carries an unpleasant odour.

The area should be uncluttered. Do not practise in the vicinity of furniture, a fire or anything that prevents free fall to the ground, especially while performing asanas such as sirshasana. Many accidents occur because people fall against an object. Do not practise under an electric fan unless it is extremely hot.

Use a folded blanket of natural material for the practices as this will act as an insulator between the body and the earth. Do not use a mattress which is spongy or filled with air as this does not give sufficient support to the spine, and do not practise on the bare floor.

Ideally, the same place is used every day to build up an atmosphere of peace.

SEQUENCE AND TIMING

How important is regularity in sadhana?

Swami Sivananda: Practise a few asanas daily for at least fifteen minutes. Be regular in your practice and possess wonderful health. Regularity is of paramount importance.

Why is morning the best time for asana practice?

Swami Sivananda: The best time for asana practice is the morning. The reason for this emphasis is that in the evening one is tired from the day's work and therefore will not be able to do the various exercises with the feeling of exhilaration and freshness which would be felt in the morning. There should be absolutely no feeling of depression or fatigue before or during the performance of these postures. This is an important point to remember if the benefits of these asanas are to be enjoyed in the fullest measure.

Why is early morning the best time for asana practice?

Swami Satyananda: Asanas may be practised at any time of day except after meals. The best time, however, is the two hours before and including sunrise. This period of the day

is known in Sanskrit as *brahmamuhurta*, the most conducive time for higher yogic practices.

At this time the atmosphere is pure and quiet, the activities of the stomach and intestines have stopped, the mind has no deep impressions on the conscious level and is empty of thoughts in preparation for the day ahead. The practitioner will probably find that the muscles are stiffest early in the morning compared to the late afternoon when they become more supple, nevertheless this time is recommended for practice. In the evening, the two hours around sunset is also a favourable time.

How much time should be spent practising asanas?

Swami Satyananda: The duration of practice should be regulated according to the available time. One should not aim too high in the beginning; only do as much practice as can easily be managed every day without fail. Fifteen minutes practice every day is better than one hour's practice on one day, none for three days and then again one hour's practice.

Many people set themselves an unrealistic program which they do for the first few days, and then the enthusiasm slowly fades and eventually they don't practise at all. It is better to be realistic in choosing the duration of the program, and once it has been set, stick to it regularly. There should be no hurrying under any circumstances. If there is a shortage of time for completion of the daily program, leave out a few asanas and do the others at the normal slow, relaxed pace.

How important is the order in which asanas are practised?

Swami Satyananda: The program of asanas should be carefully chosen. Proceed from the simpler asanas to the more difficult ones. Some people strain themselves by prematurely attempting asanas that are too difficult.

The order of practising asanas is important to gain maximum benefits. Certain asanas supplement each other, whereas others detract from each other. Therefore it is important to choose a systematic program.

When practising the middle and advanced group of asanas in particular, it is important that the program is structured so that backward bends are followed by forward bends and vice versa, and that whatever is practised on one side of the body is repeated on the other side. This concept of counterpose is necessary to bring the body back to a balanced state. Specific counterposes are sometimes recommended for certain asanas.

How should one prepare for static asanas?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are two types of asanas, dynamic and static. Initially dynamic asanas are practised to develop flexibility and control of the body. In the early stages of practice, pain and tension are created in the muscles if one tries to hold a steady asana for a long time. This results in dissipation, discomfort and disappointment, all of which are contrary to the aim of asanas. Once the dynamic asanas have increased the flexibility and strength of the body, static asanas may be practised.

Why practise asana before pranayama?

Swami Niranjanananda: It is necessary to practise asanas before pranayama for a simple reason. When asana is practised the dynamic physiological activity excites the pranas, affecting the whole body. What are the first effects that are noticed when asanas are practised? The generation of heat in the body, the stimulation of the various organs of the body, alertness of mind, the balanced activity of the internal organs, changes in the patterns of breathing, and so on. These experiences indicate the effects of the asanas on the pranas.

How important is it to have the stomach and bowels empty when practising asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Before commencing the asana program, the stomach, bladder and intestines should preferably be empty. To ensure that the stomach is empty, asanas should not be practised until at least three or four hours after food.

One reason why early morning practice is recommended is that the stomach is sure to be empty.

If constipated, drink two or three glasses of warm, slightly salted water and practise the asanas given for shankhaprakshalana, namely tadasana, tiryak tadasana, kati chakrasana, tiryak bhujangasana and udarakarshan asana. This should relieve the constipation. If not, practising pawanmuktasana part two should help. Choose one time daily to go to the toilet before doing asanas. Do not strain; try to relax the whole body. After some weeks the bowels will automatically evacuate at the set time every day. Try to avoid using laxative drugs.

APPROACH TO PRACTICE

How much physical effort should be made while practising asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Never exert undue force while doing asanas. The less physical effort required the better. The aim is to perform asanas with as little tension or muscular effort as possible. Often practitioners are seen grating their teeth while performing asanas. In the execution of the movement to and from the final pose and while in the final position, one should check that the maximum number of muscles are relaxed. This applies particularly to beginners, for eventually as control is gained over the muscles this relaxation will occur naturally. Beginners may find their muscles stiff at first, but after several weeks of regular practice will be surprised to find that their muscles are more supple.

The muscles should never be stretched further than is comfortable. With persistent and regular practice the muscles elongate, whether one is initially as stiff as a board or as supple as a piece of rubber. The mental attitude is important in this respect. If one suggests to oneself that the muscles should stretch, the mind will automatically take steps to prepare the body to attain what is wanted. Remember, it is the mind that is the controller.

How should asanas be entered and exited?

Swami Satyananda: The importance of the movements to and from the final poses must not be underestimated. They should be done slowly, smoothly, with control and in synchronization with the breath.

Why is it important not to have a competitive attitude when practising asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Asanas are not competitive. If asanas are performed in a group one should not compare oneself with others. All bodies are shaped differently and some people are able to stretch more easily than others, but this is not indicative of how well a person is performing an asana. One person may physically perform an asana perfectly, yet his awareness is jumping from here to there, while another person may not physically perform the asana so well but his awareness may be on the movements and the breath. In this case the latter is performing the asana much better than the former.

How should the awareness be directed when practising asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Awareness is as essential to the practice of asana as it is to all yoga practices. While learning the asana, one's attention should be on correct performance. There can also be awareness of relaxing as many muscles as possible to make the asana easier to perform and more effective. One can be aware of the physical movement, or of the breath while assuming the final pose. In the final position, be aware of the breath, mantra or the parts of the body that the asana particularly influences.

The purpose of asana practice is to influence, integrate and harmonize all the levels of being, namely: the physical, pranic, mental, emotional, psychic and spiritual. At first it may appear that asanas are merely concerned with the physical level, as they deal with the movement of different parts of the body, but they have profound effects at every

level of being if they are combined with awareness. As one progresses in asana sadhana, the awareness should be expanded and refined.

Awareness in this context may be understood as consciously noting sensations in the body, the physical movement, the posture itself, breath control and synchronization, movement of prana, concentration on an area of the body or chakra and, most importantly, witnessing any thoughts or feelings that may arise during the practice.

Implicit in the concept of awareness is the acceptance of any thought or feeling which comes uninvited to the mind. One should be aware of mental patterns and extraneous thoughts that occur, while at the same time having awareness of the asana being performed. If this is done, all other thoughts – a cup of tea, worries about business or whatever – will automatically evaporate. The result will be calmness and peace of mind.

This awareness is essential in order to receive optimum benefits from the practices. However, it is important to avoid mental tension caused by forced concentration during asana practice.

What are the signs of incorrect asana practice?

Swami Satyananda: Asanas are more efficacious and beneficial when performed in the proper manner after correct preparation.

If there is mental or physical tiredness after the asana program, it is a sure sign that something is being done incorrectly – perhaps trying too hard or tensing the muscles too much, or tending to concentrate too hard. If the fault cannot be identified, expert guidance should be sought. There should be a feeling of calmness and strength in both mind and body at the end of practice, far more than when the practice started.

Why are asanas practised slowly and with coordination of the breath?

Swami Satyananda: Slow, controlled movements and coordination with the breath are necessary to induce calmness

in the body and mind. Quick and sudden movements use up excessive energy, whereas the object of asanas is to conserve energy. For this reason, they are performed slowly. Asanas also aim at slowing down the breathing rate to improve the exchange of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the lungs as well as to induce mental tranquillity.

Muscular control is an essential feature and aim of asanas and is attained by slow movements, not by sudden jerks. The muscles are to be stretched and this can only be done if they are relaxed; fast movements imply excessive muscular tension. Also, during slow movements it is possible to relax the maximum number of those muscles which are not needed for that movement.

One should always breathe through the nose unless specific instructions are given to the contrary. The breath should be as deep and rhythmic as possible. Coordinate the breath with the asana practice.

Why is cultivating awareness during asana practice important?

Swami Niranjanananda: Yoga has always emphasized that one should begin with the most simple and basic practice in order to know about one's body. This does not just mean knowing how it feels in the tibia, the stomach or lower back muscles. "Oh, I did that practice and now I feel a bit more relaxed," is only the superficial aspect. Rather, one should experience and know how the body adjusts, adapts and enters into different modes from the starting point of the normal state.

Study the motionless, quiet, silent mode, and go through the other modes, the dynamic, playful mode, the adaptation to a certain condition mode, the balancing mode. In an asana class, awareness of the movement is always emphasized; each movement must be conscious and not unconscious. In the course of time, this consciousness becomes part of life: "I am aware that I am moving my hands", "I am aware that I am moving my head", "I am aware that I am looking at people".

Why is it important to practise yoga according to a traditional system?

Swami Satyananda: An important point which a student of yoga must bear in mind is that if any substantial benefit is to be derived from yogic practices, they must be strictly practised according to tradition. That is, as prescribed. In the scriptures, it is mentioned that asanas should be performed deliberately and gradually, not in haste, and with full awareness. For example, when a particular yogasana is being practised, such as the headstand or the shoulder stand, the student should know which particular centre to concentrate on and which particular area to relax.

There are certain yogic centres in the body, and during the performance of asanas one should concentrate on these centres. Every set of asanas has a particular centre where the awareness should be directed. Supposing one lies on the back and raises the legs gradually until they are vertical and the entire weight is supported by the shoulders: this is the position of *sarvangasana*, the shoulder stand, but this is only the physical aspect – and yoga is not physical. Whilst in this asana the awareness must be directed to a particular centre – the thyroid, or throat centre, known as *vishuddhi chakra*. Awareness must be kept there so that this centre then begins to awaken.

In other words, yoga is not merely physical exercise. The psychological aspect must be united with the physical aspect. The purpose of yoga is to awaken various psychic centres in the body. If the centres are not awakened, if they are in a potential state, yogasanas will not serve any useful purpose.

The idea that without concentration, that just by pressing the chin to the chest in this position the thyroid centre can be activated is wrong, it is scientifically impossible. Pressing a particular gland does not make the gland operate. The thyroid gland is being pressed, but it is not flowing, as there is no concentration on it. If one concentrates on the thyroid gland for five minutes, it will start flowing by virtue of the parasympathetic nervous

system, which is stimulated by the thought process. That is how sarvangasana is to be practiced.

Physically, there is no difference between the way others have been doing sarvangasana and the way the scriptures describe the asana. The difference is in the psychological effort.

Why should asanas be practised in a systematic way?

Swami Satyananda: Asanas should be done systematically. If a mistake is made in a series of asanas there will be fatigue in the body. It should not be so. When one gets out of bed in the morning, one stretches the body. This brings full relaxation, although temporary tension has been created in the body while stretching.

Asanas must remove fatigue and laziness. They are not exercises but postures that relax and give peace and rest, and remove rigidity from the body. If, for sometime after doing asanas, one feels lazy or sleepy, this is a sign that the asanas are not being done well. Sometimes breathing is forced during asanas. There is no adverse effect on the body but during asanas it is best to breathe in and out with control. This will bring more relaxation and rest.

Why is relaxation practised during and at the end of asana sadhana?

Swami Satyananda: Shavasana may be performed at any point during asana practice, especially when feeling physically or mentally tired. It should also be practised on completion of the asana program. This is nearly as important as the asana itself.

When one completely relaxes, the organs and muscles return to their normal shape. When this happens there is an influx of purified blood to replace the blood that has been squeezed out during performance of the asana. During this resting state the circulatory and respiratory systems also return to normal. This is necessary before one starts the next asana. During this practice of relaxation one should

try to relax the body and mind while maintaining complete awareness of the body and the breath.

Remember that although one should be relaxed, there should be no sleeping or drowsiness. One should be as wide awake as possible to gain maximum benefits. If sleepy, take a wash or a bath, preferably a cold one, and then continue the practice.

How does one know when to proceed to a more difficult practice?

Swami Niranjanananda: When an asana is practised, care should be taken of two physical aspects of the body: comfort and stability. The asana should be stopped the moment comfort changes to discomfort or stability and calmness change to movement. Asanas should only be practised according to the body's capacity. Gradually, with regular practice, each posture can be held for a longer period of time. It is unwise to hurry, as this does not give any benefit. On the contrary, the body should not be forced into any position for longer than is comfortable.

Why is daily asana practice important for the average person?

Swami Niranjanananda: Think about the lifestyle most people live. After waking in the morning, doing some chores, people sit down, whether on the bed, a sofa, in a car or at the office, the body is bent in a sitting position. It is folded forward.

Normal household movements are limited. One opens the cupboard, reaches in, brings out the tea, coffee, sugar or honey; if there is something on the top shelf, maybe there is a bit of a stretch. If a child pulls on the trouser leg, there might be a twist while looking back. If something falls, one bends forward to pick it up. This is usually the extent of the physical movements in a normal daily situation.

Therefore, there are bound to be blockages which are physical, muscular and nervous in nature, and which are also

in the realm of energy. Where there are blockages, there is going to be suffering: aches, pains, hardening of the muscles, stiffening of the joints. Daily sadhana balances one's lifestyle and removes the blockages by taking the body through its range of movements and stretching the muscles fully.

Why is so much importance placed on asanas for the spine?

Swami Sivananda: From the spinal cord thousands of nerves are divided throughout the body. In yogic asanas, generally one should concentrate more on spinal exercises and exercises meant for nerve centres which are not worked on by other physical exercise systems.

What is the aim of uniting the breath with the asana while holding a posture?

Swami Satyananda: When two things are connected it is called yoga, and in this physical body there are two things which have to be connected: the body and the mind. The breath is the medium for realizing this union.

When yoga postures are practised in the form of gymnastic exercises, that is, in a dynamic way, they can only have that type of effect. In the yogic system, however, a particular posture is maintained for a period of time, and a system of breathing is simultaneously followed. When a system of breathing is followed, concentration automatically takes place. The terminology used for this is 'yoga asana'. The word 'yoga' is used here in the sense of 'union'.

TEACHING ASANA

How important are instructions given by a teacher?

Swami Satyananda: During yoga classes the teacher gives all the necessary instructions and the practitioner merely listens and carries them out. It is far easier to gain benefits under these circumstances. However, when one practises alone, one should develop the idea that the instructor is

internal. Instead of the instructor being in the form of another person, the teacher is now inside the student's head. Mentally repeat the instructions, and then enact them. In this way awareness is more likely to be maintained throughout the practice.

Should yoga teachers use the Sanskrit names when teaching asana?

Swami Satyananda: Both Sanskrit and English names must be used in order to avoid confusion. The people of today are responsible for posterity. In two hundred years time, scholars might do research. If there are only the names lotus pose, cobra pose and peacock pose they will be confused as to how this peacock pose came about. There will be a gap in history. So both names must be used for the postures: *mayurasana* or peacock pose, *bhujangasana* or cobra pose.

Use both names and do not be guided by individual whims and narrowness of mind. Do not become blind to history, because history is a current, and this current has to be maintained. If the link is lost, in two hundred years researchers will call this cobra pose and wonder whether cobra pose came from the English people, Danish people, Balkans or who. Where did this come from? If they happen to see *bhujangasana*, they will say, "Okay, let us see. This is Sanskrit, it must have come from somewhere in India!" They will be able to link the cultural movements taking place in England with reference to India. These are the historical blunders which must be avoided as much as possible.

Should asanas be the main component of a yoga class?

Swami Niranjanananda: When teaching yoga, do not only teach asana and pranayama, but use a combination of asana, pranayama, yoga nidra, and short concentration. A good length for a practice session is one and half hours. Of this, allocate a half hour to asana practice, fifteen minutes to pranayama, twenty minutes to yoga nidra, and fifteen

minutes to concentration, beginning and ending with Shanti Path. If these four items can be incorporated into one's teaching, and also into one's personal practice, the benefits will be maximized, as all the aspects of one's nature and personality are being dealt with.

How? The psyche is influenced by the mantras, which strengthen the willpower and the positive nature of the mind by creating a connection with the internal source of strength. The health of the body is promoted through asanas and by the increase of *prana shakti*, vitality, through pranayama. Through yoga nidra one removes muscular, nervous, psychological, emotional, mental, and physical stresses. Finally, by practising concentration, the mind is cleared of unnecessary stuff accumulated during the day.

How can teachers give beginners the best start in asana practice?

Swami Niranjanananda: The intent and purpose of yogasana is fivefold: to harmonize the flow of prana with the movement of the body; to focus and concentrate on the mantra; to go deeper, developing subtle awareness; to become the *drashta*, the witness, as the posture is performed; and to fix the mind on a chakra.

To attain the point where all these five can be merged in the practice of asana, the basic training begins with *sukshma vyayama*, the subtle movements. This can be accomplished by a teaching system which for six months includes only pawanmuktasana. Those who complete the six months of pawanmuktasana go into the next class. Experience has shown that by doing pawanmuktasana for six months the body becomes so flexible that there is no problem doing any other practices. Additionally, all the imbalances of the body disappear with pawanmuktasana only, as the entire body is being moved. If people are facing any kind of problem, illness, or difficulties, they tend to simply disappear in the six-month period. This includes hypertension, diabetes and asthma.

Pawanmuktasana was developed by Swami Satyananda to progressively lead into the practice of asanas. Why did he call these series of sukshma vyayama, pawan-mukta-asana? *Pawan* means 'wind' or 'air', referring to prana, and *mukta* means 'release'. Therefore, *pawanmuktasana* means the group of asanas that remove blockages to the flow of prana.

According to ayurveda – *kapha*, mucus, *pitta*, bile and *vata*, wind, are the three humors which affect the physical and the mental behaviour. If there is an increase in any one of these three humors, the body gets sick. If kapha increases, there is too much mucus, and a cough develops, if bile increases, there is acidity, indigestion, if wind increases, there is gas. The more they are in the body, the more the functions of the body are affected. Therefore, the first attempt of yoga is to bring balance to the three humors: mucus, bile and wind. Kapha, pitta and vata.

As one ages, these humors begin to affect the body. Arthritis, rheumatism, gastric problems, acidity, burning sensations; all these things increasingly affect the ageing body. When the body is fully active and dynamic they are eliminated. In children there is no problem, they are running all day and the toxins are eliminated through their movement, running, games, play, sweat, through whatever they do.

Those toxins in older bodies are not removed because older people are not dynamic, they are static. In professions people are sitting on chairs all the time, there is no movement. There is constant consumption but there is no elimination. Defecating is not the only elimination. Toxins have to be eliminated by the whole body. As these humors accumulate in the body one starts to feel a bit stiff, a bit tight, a bit uncomfortable, a bit heavy and the balance of body is disturbed. Therefore, Swami Satyananda called this sequence of sukshma vyayama 'pawanmuktasana', meaning that with these, the defects of kapha, pitta and vata, the mucus, bile and gas can be rectified.

The purpose of pawanmuktasana, in a nutshell, is to bring balance to these three conditions. Before moving

into advanced yoga, the system must be cleared of these imbalances. Otherwise, when one goes into the advanced practices, they will have a detrimental effect on the body, in the brain, blood, heart, and lungs. The liver, kidney, everything will be toxic, and with this toxicity in the body, the energy is not going to rise, the prana is not going to vibrate. It will be there, it is there even now, but it is suppressed by layers and layers of toxic material: kapha, vata and pitta. To release these imbalances and to prepare one to move into asana practice, Swami Satyananda categorized the sukshma vyayama into three groups: the anti-rheumatic, the anti-gastric and the shakti bandhas.

In the anti-rheumatic group, *parwanmuktasana one*, there is movement of each and every joint to allow flexibility, movement, mobility and no stiffness. Once the body is free from stiffness and tightness, many things can be done. But if the body is stiff, one can't even walk properly and has to drag the body around, there is no proper movement, there is no freedom. This series of anti-rheumatic practices takes one through awareness of each and every joint and muscle of the body, connects the awareness with the body and removes the pranic blocks or the circulatory blocks.

The second sequence is the anti-gastric, *parwanmuktasana two*. It works more on the three humors: kapha, pitta and vata. First the body has to be freed from stiffness, tensions and tightness; next, one works specifically to bring balance to the three humors. The anti-gastric series was developed for this purpose. After the body has become loose, after the imbalances of kapha, pitta and vata have been rectified, the shakti bandha series is used to increase the *prana shakti*, the vital energy, by removing energy blockages from the body.

Once these aims have been accomplished, the students can move onto other asanas with ease.

Why is the guidance of a guru necessary for asana practice?

Swami Niranjanananda: If one is interested in the proper and spontaneous growth of personality, then even in the

learning of asanas, the guidance of a guru is necessary. One can practise pranayama through consulting books, the same goes for asana, but if one wants to progress further, a guru is necessary, as breath control is not the ultimate aim. Divers can control their breath and hold it for long durations, but they do not have awakened prana – that is an art, that is the science which has to be mastered. So for those who are especially interested, a guru is necessary every step of the way, from the beginning to the end, whether it concerns the physical aspect of yoga or the meditative aspect.

In general, people come to yoga for some kind of therapy, loosening up, in which case they can practise by themselves without any problem. However, even then, as not every detail can be explained in a book, if something wrong is done due to not realizing the limitations of the body, there can be an adverse effect. For example, when a photograph of someone doing perfect paschimottanasana is seen in a book, that becomes the target – the desire and ambition is to do it like that! However, if one pushes too far in an attempt to do paschimottanasana, maybe the push will be wrong. Maybe the shoulders just need to be relaxed to do it properly, but the book cannot specify that for the individual. A small detail such as this can make a big difference to the performance and benefit of the asana.



4

Beginners' Asanas

PAWANMUKTASANA

What is pawanmuktasana?

Swami Satyananda: In Sanskrit these practices are referred to as *sukshma vyayama*, which means 'subtle exercise'. The word *pawan* means 'wind' or 'prana'; *mukta* means 'release' and *asana* means 'pose'. Therefore, pawanmuktasana means a group of asanas that remove any blockages preventing the free flow of energy in the body and mind.

What is the origin of the pawanmuktasana series?

Swami Niranjanananda: When Swami Satyananda started classifying and categorizing the different systems and practices of yoga, he discovered and developed a series of *sukshma vyayama*, subtle movements, which can lead one to the perfection of asana. He called these the pawanmuktasanas. In the Satyananda Bihar Yoga tradition, yoga practice begins with the three sequences of pawanmuktasana practices: *pawanmuktasana one*, the anti-rheumatic group; *pawanmuktasana two*, the anti-gastric group; and *pawanmuktasana three*, the *shakti bandhas*, or energy block releasing poses.

What is the purpose of pawanmuktasana?

Swami Satyananda: The pawanmuktasana series is one of the most important groups of practices. It has a profound

effect on the human body and mind and is therefore a most useful tool for the yogic management of various disorders and the maintenance of health. Pawanmuktasana lays a firm foundation for the perfection of yogic asanas.

Pawanmuktasana is a valuable tool for understanding the meaning of asana, as it helps students develop awareness of the body's movements and the subtle effects they have at the various levels of being. It is a useful preparatory practice as it opens up all the major joints and relaxes the muscles of the body. The series may be practised by anyone, beginner or advanced, young or elderly. It should never be ignored and treated casually just because the practices are simple, gentle and comfortable.

Sometimes, due to bad posture, disturbed bodily functions, psychological or emotional problems or an unbalanced lifestyle, the energy becomes blocked. This initially results in stiffness, muscular tension, lack of proper blood flow and minor functional defects. If such blockages become chronic, a limb, joint or physical organ may malfunction, fail or become diseased. Regular practice of pawanmuktasana removes energy blockages from the body and prevents new ones forming. In this way it promotes total health, regulating and stabilizing the flows of energy throughout the body.

Is pawanmuktasana a good starting point for beginners of hatha yoga?

Swami Satyananda: The first postures that need to be learned are those that allow a smooth flow of energy in the body. Energy blockages in the body result in stiffness, pain and all kinds of funny feelings. Conversely, if a smooth flow of energy through every channel can be maintained for a long period, the body automatically becomes efficient and it can handle the most difficult yoga postures.

To regulate the energy flow in the body, a group of asanas known as pawanmuktasana is recommended. A lot of work and scientific studies have been done on these asanas from the point of view of energy flow. A Japanese scientist,

Dr Hiroshi Motoyama, studied yoga from a scientific point of view. He mentions clearly in his books that when the preliminary yoga postures, such as pawanmuktasana, are practised, they not only loosen the joints, but also help maintain a smooth flow of energy throughout the body. Many physiotherapy practices are a form of pawanmuktasana.

It has been found that the subtle flows of energy, ida and pingala, become smooth as the energy blocks are removed by these practices. The pawanmuktasana series should be taught first. Experience has shown that if yoga students practise these groups of postures first, they do not need to practise anything further. Unbelievable results have been achieved by teaching this series to students who come to the ashram. They used to be taught as preliminary exercises, but gradually it became clear that with only the practice of pawanmuktasana, students became free from chronic and incurable sicknesses.

The pawanmuktasana practices are a combination of about thirty exercises and if they are practiced for a year or so, every part of the body becomes flexible. The pawanmuktasana series of asanas increase blood circulation throughout the body, release tension, improve vitality and prepare the body so that it is capable of meditation.

How are the pawanmuktasana practices classified?

Swami Satyananda: Pawanmuktasana is divided into three distinct groups of asanas: the anti-rheumatic group, the digestive/abdominal group and the shakti bandha group to release energy blocks. All three groups supplement each other, stimulating and encouraging a free flow of energy throughout the body. Practitioners are advised to perfect each group before attempting the major asanas. Advanced yogasanas are frequently physically demanding and have a powerful effect on the body and mind. It is essential to respect this and prepare correctly.

Daily practice of pawanmuktasana parts one, two and three over a period of months brings about a profound

relaxation and toning of the entire psycho-physiological structure which is necessary for the practice of advanced techniques. The asanas in each group should be performed in the order given.

PAWANMUKTASANA PART ONE

What is pawanmuktasana part one?

Swami Satyananda: Pawanmuktasana part one is known as the anti-rheumatic group. This group of asanas is concerned with loosening up the joints of the body. It is excellent for those debilitated by rheumatism, arthritis, high blood pressure, heart problems or other ailments where vigorous physical exercise is not advised. It is particularly useful for eliminating energy blockages in the joints of the physical body, and for improving coordination, self-awareness and self-confidence.

How should pawanmuktasana part one be performed?

Swami Satyananda: The practices of pawanmuktasana part one can be performed in three ways, each way having a particular mental focus:

1. With awareness of the actual physical movement: the interaction between the various components of the body, i.e. bones, joints, ligaments, muscles, etc.; the movement in relation to other parts of the body; and mental counting of each completed round. This method of practice induces peace, balance and one-pointedness, which in turn brings about harmony in the physical body.

2. With awareness and integrated breathing. In addition to the awareness of physical movement described above, individual movements are synchronized with the breath. The movements become slower, which in turn slows the brain waves, further enhancing relaxation and awareness. This method of practice has a greater influence at the physical and pranic levels and is especially useful for harmonizing and revitalizing the body, and improving the function of the

internal organs. Breathing should be practised as indicated in the description of each asana. In addition, experienced students may find greater benefit gained if ujjayi pranayama is used as a breathing technique. This effectively stimulates and balances the pranic energy flowing through the nadis.

3. With awareness of the movement of prana. Prana may be experienced as a tingling sensation in the body to which one becomes sensitized with practice. Mentally, one may feel light yet one-pointed, emotionally fresh and receptive.

How much rest should be taken when practising the pawanmuktasana part one series?

Swami Satyananda: After every two or three practices, one should sit quietly in the base position with the eyes closed and be aware of the natural breath, of the part or parts of the body that have just been moved, and of any thoughts or feelings that come into the mind. After a minute or so the practice is continued. This not only rests the body, but also develops awareness of internal energy patterns, and mental and emotional processes.

This rest period is almost as important as the asanas themselves and should not be neglected. If tiredness is experienced at any point during the asana program, rest in shavasana. Shavasana should be performed for three to five minutes at the end of the program.

How do the pawanmuktasana practices relax the mind?

Swami Satyananda: These asanas, if done correctly, in a non-competitive and relaxed atmosphere, not only relax the muscles of the body, but these relaxing impulses travel back to the brain and relax the mind. By integrating the breath synchronization and awareness, the attentive faculty of the mind is made active and is not allowed to wander into tension and stress. The nature of these asanas is thus more mental than physical. If asanas are performed correctly they relax the mind, tune up the autonomic nerves, hormonal functions and the activities of internal organs.

How important is pawanmuktasana compared with more advanced practices?

Swami Niranjanananda: It does not matter whether one can perform difficult asanas or not, it does not matter if one can do the headstand, inverted postures or dynamic postures. It matters that one has awareness, first of all concerning the limitations of the body and mind. Once there is awareness of the body and mind, one gradually finds that they both respond to any type of instruction they are given.

Start gradually with simple practices. As far as the teaching of many different practices is concerned, it can be done, but nothing will really be gained from it – that is a guarantee. There may be a feeling of happiness that an exercise had been achieved, there may be satisfaction, but that is not the aim of yoga.

The main aim of yoga is to create an awareness of the body, mind and spirit, and in order to do that one first has to know what the body needs. One has to know when there is tension in the little toe or tightness in a muscle behind the kneecap. One has to develop an awareness of each and every part of the body, and that is why the practice of pawanmuktasana is emphasized so much, as it is useful in the later practices of yoga.

Pawanmuktasana helps a practitioner develop a balanced frame of mind and body, thus enabling other techniques to be performed with ease. It is not a matter of who can quickly touch the toes, or who can have fantastic experiences. It is a matter of rediscovering oneself from the beginning. Gradually, in the course of time, other dynamic and advanced practices of yoga can be included and the body will respond to these difficult postures with grace and ease. When the body responds in this way, many benefits are derived from the practices. If the body does not respond and the practices are done with force or strain, the result will be a back pain or a neck crank. Therefore, it is best to go easy, to go slowly, and as awareness is developed, go into other practices.

Hatha yoga should not be an unconscious or mechanical practice. When the techniques of hatha yoga are performed one should know what kind of changes are taking place in the body, what kind of changes can be expected, and if something new happens, how to go beyond or transcend that stage. These are the concepts of hatha yoga as described in the later editions of the hatha yoga treatises.

How can the maximum benefit be gained from pawanmuktasana part one?

Swami Satyananda: All the practices of pawanmuktasana part one are best performed while sitting on the floor in the base position. The body should be relaxed, and only those muscles associated with the asana being practised should be used. Full awareness should be given to performance of the asana. For maximum benefit the eyes remain closed. One should not practise mechanically: there should be awareness throughout the practice.

How can people with joint problems benefit from yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the anti-rheumatic series known as pawanmuktasana part one, there is only one movement at a time. For example, stretching the fingers and then closing the hand tight with the thumb inside, then again stretching and closing. In this manner, one movement is systematically done to manipulate each joint.

People with deformed bones and rheumatoid arthritis have done these practices and in time have found that the deformity goes away, the pain goes away, as the movement is doing more than just stretching the muscles. Along with the muscles, the joint is being moved, the joint is being lubricated, and excess calcium which has formed in the joints is removed.

If it is a matter of stiffness in the body, stiffening of the joints or rheumatic and arthritic problems, the practices of pawanmuktasana and allied postures are extremely useful.

What is the effect of pawanmuktasana part one on the pranic body?

Swami Satyananda: The pawanmuktasana series of exercises is very, very easy. Many people are not impressed by it. These exercises are organised on the basis of the pranic flow. They are not joint exercises, they are exercises of energy meridians.

Pawanmuktasana teaches control of the pranas – by this method one tries to expand their prana to the higher body. When the pranas shrink from the body, the body becomes ill and when the pranas are properly distributed to all parts of the body, the body becomes vigorous. To ensure proper distribution of prana to all parts of the body, pawanmuktasana should be performed, as it releases the prana from wherever it has been blocked. It also eliminates unwanted toxins.

There are thousands of chakras in the body; energy flows from the chakras to other parts of the body through the nadis. The nadis are known as meridians in the Chinese system of acupuncture. In this physical body the energy flows through the nadis and is distributed through thousands of chakras. The effect of pawanmuktasana on the flow of prana in the meridians has been established by scientific study.

Sometimes this energy is blocked or in excess. Whether there is too much or too little, there will be trouble. There are certain chakras which distribute the energy of pingala, and other chakras that distribute the energy of ida. Pawanmuktasana helps improve and awaken the chakras.

Why is pawanmuktasana part one such an important yoga practice?

Swami Niranjanananda: From a practical understanding of the yogic system, the techniques of pawanmuktasana part one are of utmost importance, as during this practice one actually meditates on each and every joint and part of the body.

The performance of asana should not be a practice of movement in which awareness of the body is lost and

instead there is identification with the pleasures of the body. Normally one tends to become involved in the pleasure generated by the posture. There tends to be identification with the movement that is being performed during asana practice, but movement is a superficial aspect of the asana.

Creating a meditative state is the real aim of asana. For this reason pawanmuktasana has to be the most important group of postures in yoga. In pawanmuktasana, one identifies with each and every joint, each and every muscle and part of the body.

Much research is being done with plants to see how they grow when given proper care and attention. Why not apply the same principle to one's big toe? Why not give proper care and attention to the big toe so that its pranic flow becomes active? When that happens, the entire cellular structure of the big toe undergoes a transformation. An experiment can be done by practising with the right toe only and then comparing it with the left toe after three months. Maybe the right toe will become bigger and fatter than the left one!

Why is it claimed that if pawanmuktasana is practised, no other asanas are needed?

Swami Niranjanananda: If one practices and perfects pawanmuktasana, there is no need to practise any other yoga posture, as pawanmuktasana has everything in it. With the practice of pawanmuktasana, one comes in contact with each and every part of the body. There is awareness of each and every muscle movement. There is observation of the physical condition – the limitations and the possibilities. One learns to control the body and the physical energies.

With the regulation of the circulation and prana in the body, with the movement of each and every joint and muscle and ligament and part and organ of the body, all the imbalances of the body eventually vanish. People have experienced relief from diabetes and cancer with only the practice of pawanmuktasana.

What research has been conducted on the pawanmuktasana part one series?

Swami Satyananda: Pawanmuktasana is a group of postures that is a speciality of Bihar School of Yoga. This group of asanas was the subject of research in Japan. Dr. Hiroshi Motoyama, a scientist and yogi, researched this asana group and wrote a book on his findings. He is a great doctor and also a master in the science of acupuncture. Additionally, he is a Shinto and knows yoga and parapsychology, so his research was extensive.

This research was conducted from the point of view of modern science; he examined the sympathetic and parasympathetic inflows and outflows, the flow of yin and yang, and also the flows of ida and pingala nadis. Based on his findings, he wrote that pawanmuktasana part one is a system of acupuncture without needles. In the introduction to the book he says, “If you want acupuncture without needles, practise the pawanmuktasana group of asanas because this asana clears energy blocks by emphasis on relaxation.”

Even the swamis of Bihar School of Yoga did not know this; they thought they were practising pawanmuktasana for improving the joints. But at the joints there is a bunch or a junction of nadis, and from these junctions thousands of pathways of energy flow to different parts of the body.

What are the effects of long-term practice of pawanmuktasana part one?

Swami Niranjanananda: Research carried out at the University of Massachusetts, USA, found that every twenty years there is loss of memory. Why? Because the dead brain cells block the electrical impulses which go from one centre of the brain to another, meaning there is no clear route for this transmission to take place. This diminished transmission is experienced physically as loss of memory.

The researchers also discovered something else. If the pawanmuktasana series is practised continuously for six

months, it helps to eliminate dead cells from the body. It is a scientific conclusion that if the techniques of pawanmuktasana are regularly practised for six months at the age of forty and at the age of sixty, this twenty-year cycle of change is affected and the memory remains as fresh as ever due to the process of descaling, of removing the blockages.

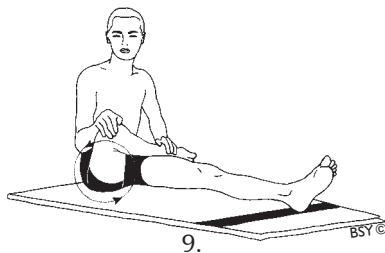
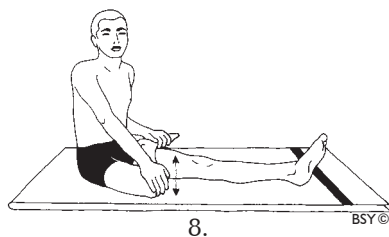
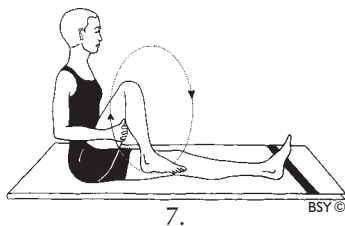
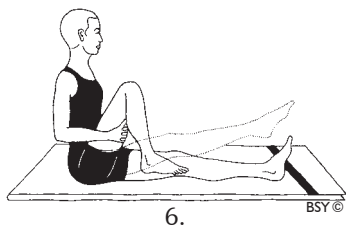
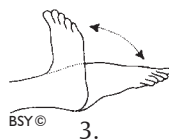
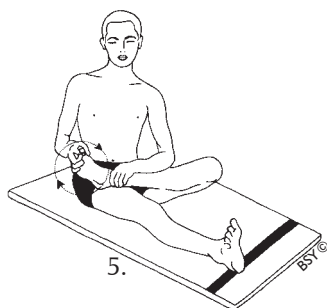
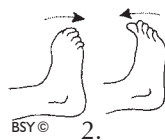
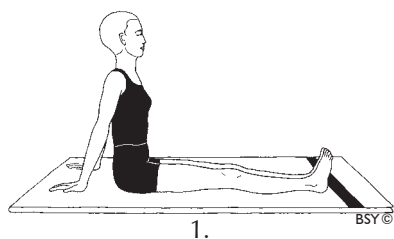
These techniques are not usually understood in this way. Instead, people think they are only practices for beginners to help prepare the body for the advanced postures, but the yogic tradition does not say this. It says one only needs to practise advanced yoga postures to alter a condition of the body which has developed due to living a particular lifestyle.

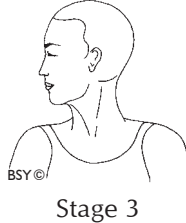
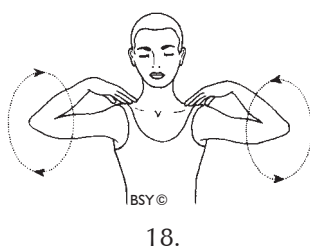
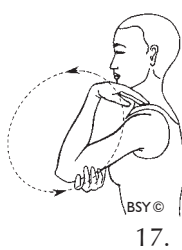
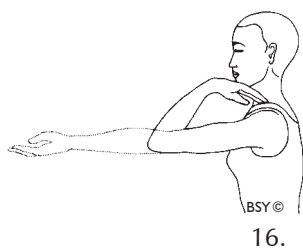
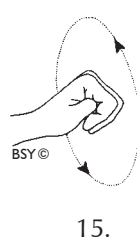
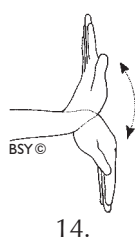
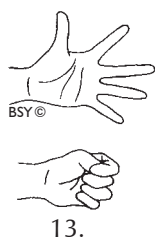
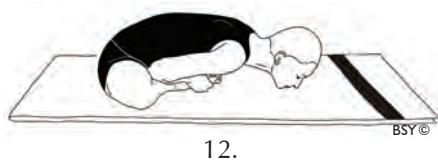
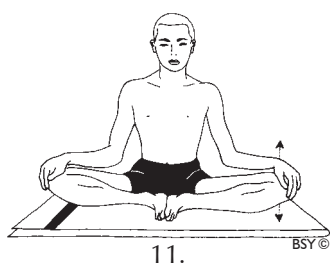
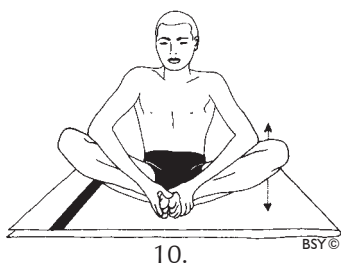
If one starts yoga early enough, there is no need to practise the headstand or the lotus posture. Pawanmuktasana can be practised for the whole life, and the practitioner will remain forever young, with no need of other yoga postures. Other asanas are only needed in order to rectify the imbalances that affect the functioning of different organs and pranic channels. However, the general thinking is that the more complicated and difficult the postures are, the better the yogi will become. This is a misconception.

Pawanmuktasana Part One

1. Parambhik Sthiti (base position)
2. Padanguli Naman (toe bending)
3. Goolf Naman (ankle bending)
4. Goolf Chakra (ankle rotation)
5. Goolf Ghoornan (ankle crank)
6. Janu Naman (knee bending)
7. Janu Chakra (knee crank)
8. Ardha Titali Asana (half butterfly)
9. Shroni Chakra (hip rotation)
10. Poorna Titali Asana (full butterfly) Stage 1
11. Poorna Titali Asana (full butterfly) Stage 2
12. Poorna Titali Asana (full butterfly) Variation
13. Mushtika Bandhana (hand clenching)
14. Manibandha Naman (wrist bending)

15. Manibandha Chakra (wrist joint rotation)
16. Kehuni Naman (elbow bending)
17. Kehuni Chakra (elbow rotation)
18. Skandha Chakra (shoulder socket rotation)
19. Greeva Sanchalana (neck movements) Stages 1–4





19.

PAWANMUKTASANA PART TWO

What is the purpose of pawanmuktasana part two?

Swami Satyananda: This group of asanas is concerned specifically with strengthening the digestive system. It is excellent for people with indigestion, constipation, acidity, excess wind or gas, lack of appetite, diabetes, disorders of the male or female reproductive systems and varicose veins. It also eliminates energy blockages in the abdominal area.

What is the starting position for pawanmuktasana part two?

Swami Satyananda: All these asanas are performed by lying flat on the back with the legs together and straight. The arms should be by the sides, palms down, and the head, neck and spine in a straight line. Be sure to use a thin mat or a blanket, particularly with asanas such as *supta pawanmuktasana*, the leg lock pose, and *jhulana lurhakanasana*, rocking and rolling, where the body is balanced on the spinal vertebrae.

How should the awareness be directed during pawanmuktasana part two?

Swami Satyananda: While practising pawanmuktasana part two, be aware of:

1. movement
2. intra-abdominal pressure
3. the stretch of the muscles
4. breathing.

Should pawanmuktasana part two be practised as a complete series?

Swami Satyananda: When starting this series it is not advisable to attempt all the practices in one go, especially those which involve using both legs together. It is better to choose one practice at a time and incorporate that into the previous sadhana. The pawanmuktasana part two series requires a

great deal of effort and may put a strain on the lower back. Therefore, be aware of physical limitations and do not strain.

How much relaxation should be practised during pawanmuktasana part two?

Swami Satyananda: Before starting the practice, the body and mind should be calm and relaxed. This is best achieved through the practice of shavasana. In addition, a short rest should be taken between asanas, lying in shavasana. One minute or thirty seconds should be sufficient, but a more reliable guide is to rest until the breathing returns to normal.

What are the contra-indications for the practises of pawanmuktasana part two?

Swami Satyananda: These practices should not be performed by people suffering from high blood pressure, serious heart conditions, back conditions such as sciatica and slipped disc, or soon after abdominal surgery. If there is any doubt, please consult a competent therapist. In asanas where the feet are raised above the head, consult the cautions for inverted asanas as well as observing the contra-indications given for individual practices.

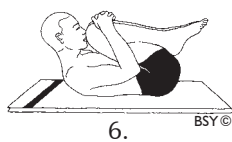
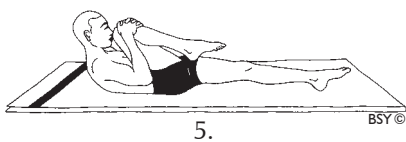
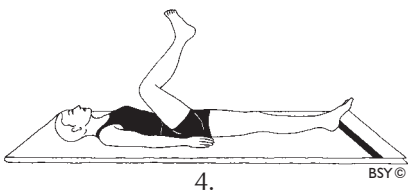
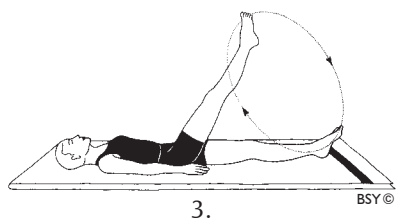
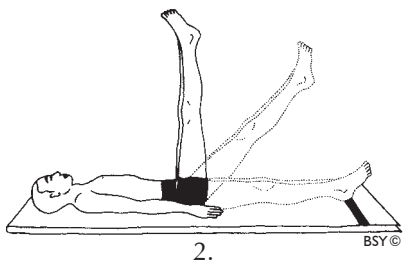
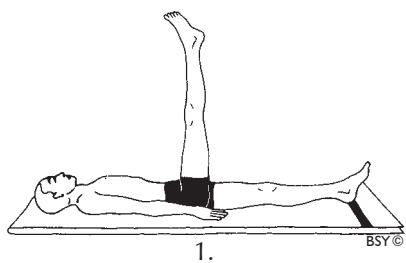
Pawanmuktasana Part Two

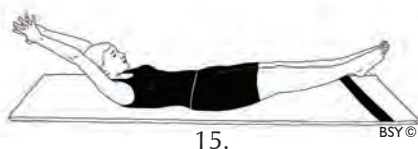
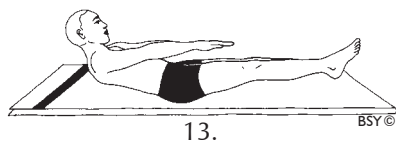
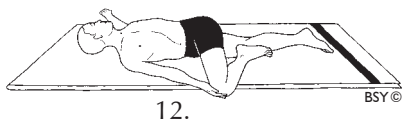
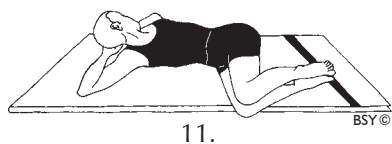
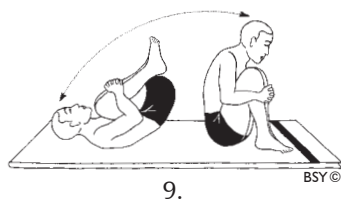
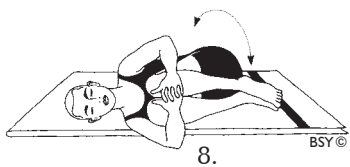
1. Padotthanasana (raised legs pose) Stage 1
2. Padotthanasana (raised legs pose) Stage 2
3. Padachakrasana (leg rotation)
4. Pada Sanchalanasana (cycling)
5. Supta Pawanmuktasana (leg lock pose) Stage 1
6. Supta Pawanmuktasana (leg lock pose) Stage 2
7. Supta Pawanmuktasana (leg lock pose) Variation
8. Jhulana Lurhakanasana (rocking and rolling) Stage 1
9. Jhulana Lurhakanasana (rocking and rolling) Stage 2
10. Udghatita Granthasana (open book pose) Sequence
11. Supta Udarakarshanasana (sleeping abdominal stretch pose)
12. Shava Udarakarshanasana (universal spinal twist)

13. Naukasana (boat pose)

14. Naukasana (boat pose) Variation 1

15. Naukasana (boat pose) Variation 2





PAWANMUKTASANA PART THREE

What are the effects of the shakti bandha asanas?

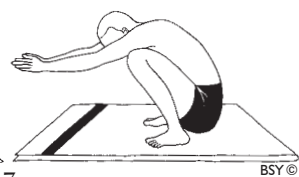
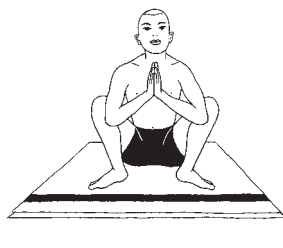
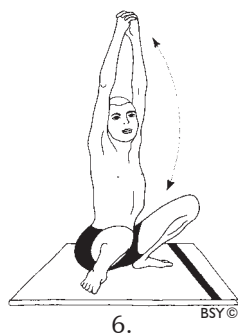
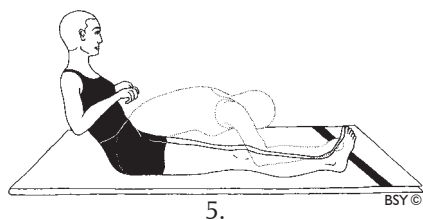
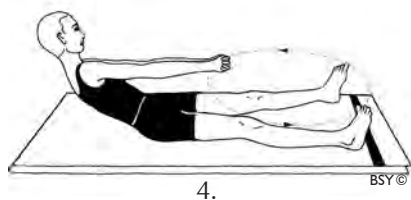
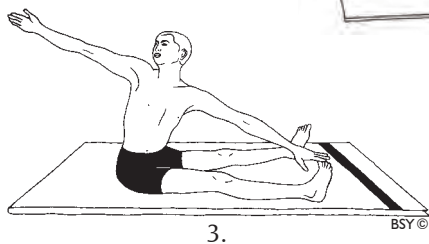
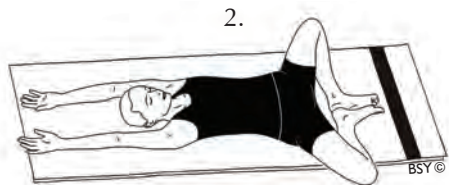
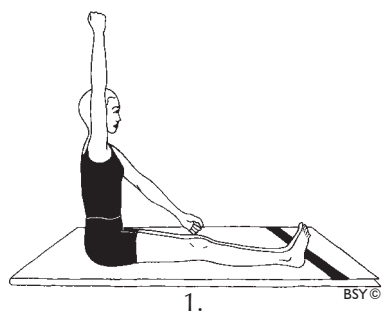
Swami Satyananda: The shakti bandhas are known as pawanmuktasana part three. They are concerned with improving the energy flow in the body and breaking down neuro-muscular knots. They also eliminate energy blockages in the spine, activate the lungs and heart, and improve endocrine function. The series is useful for those with reduced vitality and a stiff back, and is especially useful for menstrual problems and toning the pelvic organs and muscles. It can be practised after pregnancy for retoning flaccid muscles.

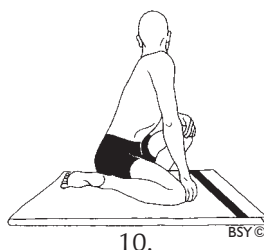
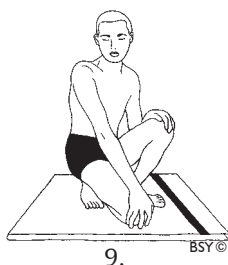
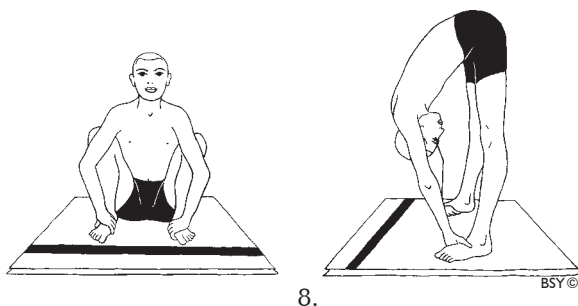
What precautions should be observed when practising the shakti bandhas?

Swami Satyananda: If the practitioner is in good health and fitness, the shakti bandhas may be practised in full. If there are any serious ailments, however, a therapist should first be consulted. The contra-indications given for individual practices must be observed.

Pawanmuktasana Part Three

1. Rajju Karshanasana (pulling the rope)
2. Surya pushpam (sunflower) Sequence
3. Gatyatmak Meru Vakrasana (dynamic spinal twist)
4. Chakki Chalanasana (churning the mill)
5. Nauka Sanchalanasana (rowing the boat)
6. Kashtha Takshanasana (chopping wood)
7. Namaskarasana (salutation pose) Sequence
8. Vayu Nishkasana (wind releasing pose) Sequence
9. Kauva Chalasana (crow walking)
10. Udarakarshanasana (abdominal stretch pose)





RELAXATION ASANAS

Why are relaxation asanas important?

Swami Satyananda: The importance of this series of relaxation poses cannot be over-emphasized. They should be performed before and after an asana session and at any time when the body becomes tired. The asanas in this group appear easy at first, yet to do them properly is quite difficult as the tension in all the muscles of the body must be consciously released. The muscles often seem to be completely relaxed even though tightness still remains. Even during sleep, relaxation is elusive.

The relaxation asanas give the body the rest it so badly needs. Constant postural abnormalities put excess strain on the muscles of the back and simply lying down does not relieve it. These relaxation practices, which are done in the prone position, are deeply relaxing to the spine and related structures.

Why are relaxation poses included in asana sadhana?

Swami Sivananda: Relaxation is an important factor in muscular exercise. Muscles that are put under severe strain demand relaxation and rest, which shavasana promptly and efficiently ensures.

In halasana, sarvangasana, paschimottanasana, dhanurasana and ardha matsyendrasana the muscles of the back, the chest, the arms and the thighs are stretched and contracted to an enormous degree. During intense muscular activity metabolism is increased. During metabolism all the muscular tissues are supplied with freshly oxygenated blood or plasma through capillary oozing, and carbon dioxide is taken back through the veins to the right auricle of the heart. This is termed tissue respiration.

Mark the wonderful creation and working of the internal mechanism of the body! How marvellous is the machinery! Can a scientist make a single atom, a single cell, a single organ of the body? Bow with folded hands before the Creator of this wonderful mechanism of the body. Repeat *Om Om Om*. Enter into silence. Meditate. The whole mystery of creation will be revealed unto you through His grace.

Why do people need yoga for relaxation?

Swami Satyananda: Relaxation is an art, and there are various practices which one can develop and use to bring about relaxation of the mind and body, transforming life into an expression of wellbeing. Relaxation is also a science: how to relax is based on solid scientific fact.

Relaxation sounds easy – one merely closes the eyes and sleeps. For most people, however, relaxation, deep relaxation, is difficult. While resting, their minds are in a state of turmoil and their bodies are continually tossing and turning, and the muscles twitching. The biggest obstacle to be overcome is taking active steps to bring about relaxation, to develop and use the various techniques that are available. As most people cannot relax in the real sense of the word, they find that their whole life changes by merely

learning how to relax. It is such a simple thing, but it brings wonderful results.

During yoga classes wonderful changes can be seen in people. Many people walk into class with tension written on every line of their face and in every word they speak. Aggression pervades them. Their bodies are filled with tension, worry and unhappiness. They start practices, not necessarily difficult ones, and slowly but surely the stress and emotional turmoil begin to evaporate. They generally don't know it, but the yoga teacher can see the transformation on their faces. The students only realize their relaxation at the end of the lesson when they find that they are smiling, really smiling, not superficially, for the first time in days, and that they are singing to themselves as they walk down the street. They find that in comparison to before the lesson they are feeling light, carefree and have confidence in themselves.

This is not an exception but the rule. By the systematic process of relaxation techniques, a change has come about in their whole attitude towards themselves, to other people and life in general. This transformation may only last for an hour or so, but it leaves a wonderful impression on the mind, and helps to permanently encourage a more relaxed attitude towards life. It is a starting point from which mental and physical relaxation can begin to be enjoyed as a normal part of life, whether during intense activity, sleep or at any time, rather than as something that is only experienced occasionally, perhaps during yoga practices.

Yoga believes that life should be an expression of relaxation and joy. The way is by cultivating the ability to relax under all conditions and at all times. All yoga practices bring about relaxation and a thorough revitalization of the body and mind, whether by means of asanas, pranayama or meditation practices. There are, however, some special techniques which are extremely simple, and which bring about relaxation in a short period of time. These techniques include the relaxation asanas.

How can one learn to relax fully?

Swami Satyananda: How can one learn to relax well? As is often the case, the answer can be found by observing animals, or those humans who are less disturbed by the tumultuous world, namely our children. When a child sleeps it forgets all problems. When a child sleeps it really sleeps, if it plays, it really plays and when it works it works. There is full intensity in the activity at hand. Adults have the habit of mentally working when they sleep and play, and of sleepwalking when they work.

Relaxation techniques start by taking one's consciousness away from emotionally charged thoughts and directing it to activities that are emotionally neutral such as awareness of the breath or of different parts of the body. It is almost impossible to remain, or to become, tense and angry when attention is directed towards the big toe. In this way, relaxation techniques stop the ceaseless and futile cycle of brooding on problems. Simultaneously the muscles are consciously relaxed. Many people, however, find this a difficult process.

During yoga lessons people are told to relax, and though their bodies remain stiff and tense, they believe they are fully relaxed. Relaxation techniques require one to consciously instruct the muscles to relax. After regular practice relaxation becomes possible. When an animal or child relaxes or sleeps, its muscles sink towards the floor, and where possible assume the same shape as the floor. This is a good indication that there is no undue muscular tension remaining.

When the whole body is immobilized, as in relaxation practices, and different parts of the body are systematically relaxed, what exactly happens? Of course the muscles are relaxed, something they very much need to be. Since the muscles are not being used, both the sensory nerves, which send messages from the muscles to the brain, and the motor nerves, which send messages of action from the brain to the muscles, cease to function. This cuts off consciousness of the body. The more one is able to relax and not move the muscles, the less aware of the body one becomes. There is a

feeling of lightness and euphoria due to this disconnection between mind and body. In deeper states of relaxation the mind seems to be completely detached from the body. This disconnection produces wonderful effects. The muscle cells, nerve cells, organ cells, blood vessels, etc., become totally relaxed and in this way are revitalized. And of course, regions of the brain are given much needed rest from the continual influx of sensory data from the body and the outside world. Further, awareness of different parts of the body or the breath coaxes the mind away from normal patterns of worry or discontent. This has a wonderful calming influence on the mind.

The amount of benefit gained from relaxation techniques is in direct proportion to the degree of mental awareness on the practice in hand. If one is not aware of the mechanics of the practice there will be little gain or no results. But if awareness is maintained throughout the practice, a few minutes relaxation can be worth more, and be more refreshing, than many hours of sleep.

When should relaxation asanas be practised?

Swami Satyananda: Relaxation asanas are especially recommended for any back or spinal problem. These postures can be adopted during any time of the day for any comfortable duration. They can be combined with relaxing daily activities as well.

How can relaxation be induced when one is extremely tense?

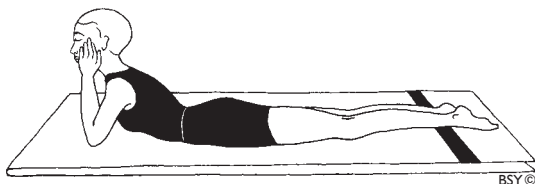
Swami Satyananda: It may seem surprising, but the first step in attaining deep relaxation through asanas is to tense the whole body. It is only after applying muscular tension to the entire body that one can subsequently allow the whole body to relax. When one does a particularly hard day's physical work, it is easy to lie down on the bed and rest or sleep. In the same way, certain asanas can be used to create a condition in the body that enables it to relax.

Naukasana, the boat pose, is a practice from pawanmuktasana two. It places the body into a state of tension which then allows the muscles and joints to relax spontaneously. It brings immediate relief to people suffering from nervousness and tension.

Naukasana requires great effort. Those who find it impossible to raise their body in naukasana can simply tense their whole body while remaining on the ground. However, this alternative is much less effective than the raised position.

Naukasana can be practised before shavasana or other relaxation poses.

MAKARASANA: CROCODILE POSE



How is makarasana described in traditional hatha yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: In *Gheranda Samhita* (2:40), makarasana is described:

*Adhyaasya shete hridayam nidhaaya, bhoomau cha paadau
prasaaryamaanau;
Shirashcha dhritvaa karadandayugme, dehaagnikaaram
makaraasanam tat.*

Lie with the chest on the ground and the legs spread out and hold the head in the arms. This asana, which activates fire of the body, is called makarasana.

Sage Gheranda says the chest should be touching the earth and, *paadauprasaaryamaanau*, the legs should be kept separated. Today the practice of makarasana is normally done with the legs kept together or slightly separated, and the chest raised.

For spiritual purposes, concentration is on manipura chakra.

How can makarasana help people with spinal problems?

Swami Niranjanananda: Makarasana is effective for people suffering from slipped disc, sciatica, and certain types of lower back pain. They should remain in this asana for extended periods of time as it encourages the vertebral column to resume its normal shape and relieves compression of the spinal nerves.

The breaths should be counted with concentration on the lower back. People with back or spinal complaints can practise moving the awareness up along the spine from the tailbone to the neck with inhalation and back down with exhalation, imagining that the breath is moving up and down the spine, like mercury in a glass tube. This quickly activates the healing energies in this area. For lower back pain which is due to tension, this area should be concentrated on while feeling it expanding and relaxing with every inhalation and exhalation.

However, people with back conditions such as exaggerated lumbar curve, should not practise this asana if any pain is experienced.

What are the effects of makarasana on the respiratory system?

Swami Niranjanananda: Makarasana expands the chest and lungs. Asthmatics and people with other lung ailments should practise this simple asana regularly with breath awareness as it allows an increased volume of air to enter the lungs and helps to clear accumulated kapha or phlegm from the throat.

When the throat is raised in makarasana the wind pipe and oesophagus come into a straight line. Normally the oesophagus and windpipe remain bent and kapha collects in the bent section where there is a valve. When one eats or drinks it does not go down the windpipe, it enters the oesophagus. Similarly when one breathes, the breath does

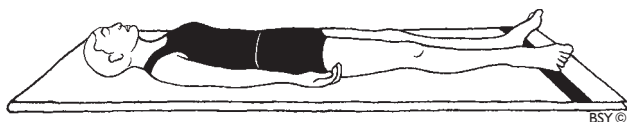
not go down the oesophagus, it only enters the windpipe; both have different paths. Kapha collects where the two paths separate. When makarasana is practised these tubes are straightened, accumulated kapha is cleared and the closed path is opened.

How long should makarasana be held?

Swami Satyananda: Those suffering from spinal or lung ailments should lie in makarasana for as long as possible – the longer the better. One can even read a book in this asana. Being in this position encourages the spine to resume its normal shape and releases compression of the spinal nerves (sciatica). The chest is also expanded allowing an increased amount of air to enter the lungs, which is a great help in alleviating congestion and other ailments of the respiratory system.

This asana can also be used as a simple meditation pose by those who find sitting asanas impossible.

SHAVASANA: CORPSE POSE



What is the meaning and significance of shavasana?

Swami Satyananda: *Shavasana* is the corpse pose. *Shav* means 'corpse'. This asana has been adapted from the tantric practice of shavasana in which the sadhaka sits on the corpse and practises his mantra. In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:32) it is stated:

*Uttaanam shavaravadbhoomau shayanam tachchhavaasanam.
Shavaasanam shraantiharam chittavishraantikaarakam.*

Lying flat on the ground with the face upwards, in the manner of a dead body, is shavasana. It removes tiredness and enables the mind (and whole body) to relax.

Shavasana is also known as the pose of relaxation and it is essential to practise it in between other asanas or after a hectic day.

Shavasana is a simple practice but most people find it almost impossible to completely relax the body. There is a tendency to hold tension in some part. The whole body must relax, then the breathing simultaneously slows down. Try to ignore the mental chatter and concentrate only on the breath and body.

This practice is useful for developing body awareness and pratyahara. When the body is completely relaxed, awareness of the mind develops. Its effects influence the physical as well as the psychological structure.

Shavasana is beneficial no matter what the condition is, even in perfect health, as it brings up the latent impressions buried within the subconscious mind, and the mind which operates during waking consciousness relaxes and subsides. This is why it is necessary to practise shavasana for developing dharana and dhyana. Even though it is a static pose it revitalizes the entire system.

What is mritasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: The more common name for *mritasana* is shavasana, the corpse pose. It is a simple and deeply relaxing practice for most people, and a meditation asana in its own right if the practitioner remains awake. In *Gheranda Samhita* (2:20) it is described:

*Uttaanam shavavat bhoomau shayanam tu shavaasanam
Shavaasanam shramaharam chittavishraantikaaranam.*

Relax the whole body on the floor like a dead person.
Shavasana removes fatigue and relaxes the mind.

Why is a practice as simple as shavasana so beneficial?

Swami Satyananda: Basically, shavasana relaxes the whole physiological-psychological system. A relaxed mind allows one to see and relate to the world and to people in a more

realistic light, carry out work more smoothly and attain greater happiness in life.

A tense mind automatically implies a tense body. The majority of diseases are a result of this combination. Shavasana, by relaxing the mind-body complex, helps to relieve and prevent disease. Its benefits are inestimable.

Why should the palms face upward when practising shavasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Having the palms facing upward may feel awkward at first, or there may be some discomfort due to twisting of the wrists, but gradually, with practice, this asana becomes extremely comfortable.

One reason it is so relaxing is that only a little sensation is felt in the backs of the hands as there are few sensory nerve fibres in that part of the body. In contrast, the palms of the hands are highly sensitive as many sensory nerve endings are located there and transmit sensory stimuli to the brain. When the palms face up, sensory stimulation is reduced. For this reason, it is recommended that the palms are kept open and facing upward.

How can the maximum benefits be gained from practising shavasana?

Swami Satyananda: Shavasana gives maximum benefits if one's attention is totally involved in the practice. If shavasana is practised without enthusiasm it will not give the required results. A little mental effort is necessary, but without mental strain.

Shavasana is ideally practised after *naukasana*, the boat pose, because while *naukasana* creates tension, shavasana releases it. Shavasana can and should be practised whenever one feels tired or tense. It is such a simple practice, yet it brings wonderful results. It should also be performed after yoga exercises or asanas, and between the practices if there is any feeling of tiredness.

The duration of the practice should suit the time that is available; the longer the better. For normal purposes five or ten minutes is sufficient. Naukasana takes between three and four minutes, so in combination they take little time, especially in relation to the vast benefits that they can give.

One should try not to move the body at all during the practice of shavasana. There is a good reason for this: even the slightest movement brings certain muscles into play, immediately creating muscular contraction, the very thing that is trying to be eliminated.

Some people find it uncomfortable to lie flat on the floor with only a pillow under their head. In this case a pillow or folded blanket may also be placed under the knees, to take up the gap between the floor and the back of the knees, and under the small of the back in the region of the waist. The support of these extra cushions increases the relaxation. One should not lie on a soft bed or mattress as this prevents one distinguishing whether the muscles are relaxing or not. If the atmosphere is cold or if there are any insects in the air, cover the body with a large sheet or blanket, but ensure that the covering is not too heavy.

Why is shavasana sometimes used for breathing practices?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shavasana is used during preparatory breathing practices which teach the student how to breathe correctly in a relaxed state. Shavasana helps one become more intimately aware of the respiratory processes, as it enables each part of the body to be absolutely relaxed, from the muscles of the limbs to the eyelids, tongue, lungs and abdomen.

How can the practice of shavasana be deepened?

Swami Niranjanananda: There are various methods to become one-pointed, focused and to go deeply into shavasana. Initially, simply be aware of the body or focus the mind on the breathing. The practice can be deepened by rotating the consciousness around the different parts of the body and relaxing each one in turn. Another technique is to count the

breaths, or to do a short practice of yoga nidra in shavasana. All methods of focusing oneself are valid, but the final state or culmination of shavasana is yoga nidra.

Why is it important to remain still and awake during shavasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: There should be no physical movement in shavasana. Once the body is settled, awareness of the asana should be maintained, otherwise the desire for sleep will take over and harmony between body and mind will be lost. Awareness and stability are the main components of shavasana. Even a small movement means contracting the muscles which disturbs the stillness of the posture. This awareness requires a little mental effort, but it should be without tension. Sleeping in shavasana reduces many of its benefits, as during sleep the mind is again filled with worries. To obtain maximum physical and mental relaxation, shavasana should be practised with full awareness.

How often should shavasana be practised?

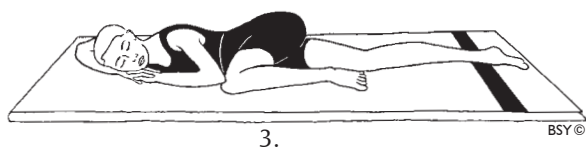
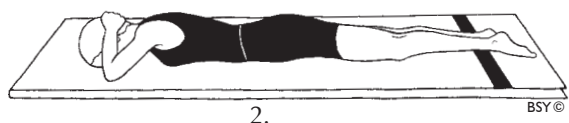
Swami Niranjanananda: Shavasana should be practised between asanas, especially dynamic asanas such as surya namaskara. It should be done regularly several times a day by people suffering from high blood pressure, nervous disorders, diabetes, heart disease and other stress-induced diseases. Shavasana can also be practised prior to sleeping.

How does shavasana help one develop pratyahara?

Swami Niranjanananda: This asana relaxes the whole psychophysiological system. It cures ailments caused by tension by making the body and mind peaceful and relaxed. Physical and mental tiredness are removed. It should be practised if the body is over-stimulated or excited. Shavasana develops body awareness; when the body is completely relaxed, awareness of the mind increases, developing pratyahara. The mind will remain peaceful and without worries, even in the most difficult situations, if this practice can be mastered.

ADDITIONAL RELAXATION ASANAS

1. Advasana (reversed corpse pose)
2. Jyestikasana (superior posture)
3. Matsya Kridasana (flapping fish pose)



VAJRASANA GROUP OF ASANAS

Note: In the Satyananda Yoga system vajrasana, veerasana, bhadrasana and simhasana are classified as beginners asanas. Traditionally they are used as meditation asanas. For this reason classical hatha yoga often includes mudras and bandhas in their practice. As simple asanas they are suitable for beginners, however, the inclusion of mudras and bandhas transforms them into advanced meditative techniques.

What are the vajrasana group of asanas?

Swami Satyananda: The *vajra* or thunderbolt is said to be the weapon of Indra, king of the *devas* or gods, just as the mind is the king of all the senses. Vajrasana is highly thought of as a meditation posture in many cultures throughout the world. Vajra is also the major nadi directly connected with

the genito-urinary system, which regulates the sexual energy in the body. Control of vajra nadi leads to sublimation and control of sexual energy. The vajrasana series is therefore very beneficial for the reproductive as well as digestive organs and is also reasonably easy to perform.

VAJRASANA: THUNDERBOLT POSE

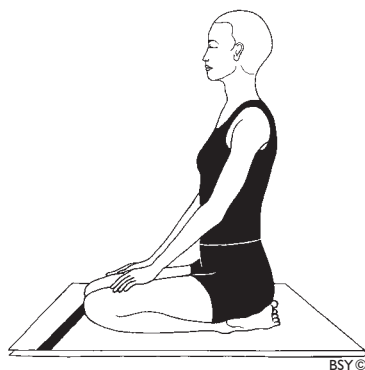
What is the effect of vajrasana on vajra nadi?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the Yoga Upanishads it is said that vajrasana affects vajra nadi, which is associated with the sciatic nerve. Vajra nadi corresponds to the sciatic nerve up to the hip joints and along the spine. It is one of the ten major nadis that run along the spinal passage into the brain.

One of the functions of vajra nadi relates to sexual energy, which is stimulated when the insides of the feet are pressed against the buttocks. The Yoga Upanishads mention that the sexual impulses can be controlled through vajra nadi.

The *vajra*, or thunderbolt, is the weapon or force of Indra, king of the gods. It is also mentioned in Greek mythology as being the thunderbolt of Zeus. The kingly aspect is represented by the mind, which is the king of the senses. Vajra is the stimulating factor for the sensory inputs and outputs. Vajrasana is therefore a physical aid for the practice of pratyahara. Voluntary control of vajra nadi induces automatic pratyahara. After sitting in vajrasana for five minutes, there is greater calmness in the mind.

Physically, vajrasana is also a posture specifically for the digestive and reproductive systems. When pressure is exerted on vajra nadi, the energy is channeled into the digestive area in the form of nerve, blood and tissue activation. The energy of manipura chakra is thereby



BSY ©

increased, improving digestion. Vajrasana also increases the parasympathetic energy in the lower body and allows relaxation to occur more easily.

What is the effect of vajrasana on the nadis?

Swami Sivananda: The practice of vajrasana has a stimulating, beneficial influence on the *kanda*, the origin of the nadis, which is situated above the anus and from which the 72,000 nadis spring.

How can vajrasana be used to assist digestion?

Swami Satyananda: Practise vajrasana directly after meals, for at least five minutes to enhance the digestive function. In cases of acute digestive disorder, sit in vajrasana and practise abdominal breathing for 100 breaths before and after food. Do not strain.

How long should one sit in vajrasana?

Swami Satyananda: For extended periods of time if performed for spiritual aims. Otherwise a few minutes daily is sufficient to loosen up the legs. If any strain is experienced, stop the asana.

Where should the awareness be placed while practising vajrasana?

Swami Satyananda: Physically, awareness should be on the sensations in the legs, buttocks and spine. When comfortable in the asana one can become aware of the normal breathing process. This brings tranquillity to the mind if practised with the eyes closed. For spiritual purposes, awareness should be on manipura chakra.

What are the benefits of vajrasana?

Swami Satyananda: Vajrasana alters the flow of blood and nervous impulses in the pelvic region and strengthens the pelvic muscles. It is a preventative measure against hernia and also helps relieve piles. It reduces the blood flow to the

genitals and massages the nerve fibres which feed them, making it useful in dilated veins of the testicles and hydrocele in men. It alleviates menstrual disorders. It increases the efficiency of the entire digestive system, relieving stomach ailments such as hyperacidity and peptic ulcer.

It stimulates the vajra nadi, activates prana in sushumna and redirects sexual energy for spiritual purposes.

Why is vajrasana an important meditative asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Vajra nadi is the stimulating factor for the sensory inputs and outputs. Vajrasana is therefore a physical aid for the practice of pratyahara. Voluntary control of vajra nadi induces automatic pratyahara. After sitting in vajrasana for five minutes, there is greater calmness in the mind, better concentration and awareness of sensory experience.

Physically, vajrasana is an important meditative posture as it gives support to the spine, and the body automatically becomes upright and straight in the position without any effort. In sukhasana or siddhasana the body may slump forward, but in vajrasana the spine remains upright and straight, quite naturally and without effort. Vajrasana can be used as a meditation posture by people suffering from sciatica, back pain and sacral infections.

Vajrasana is the prayer pose of Muslims and Christians and the meditation pose of Buddhists. In *Gheranda Samhita* (2:13) Sage Gheranda identifies vajrasana as a steady asana suitable for meditation and higher yoga practice.

*Janghaabhyaam vajravatkritvaa gudaapaarshve padaavubhau;
Vajraasanam bhavedetadyoginaam siddhidaayakam.*

Making both thighs hard and strong like vajra, the feet are placed on either side of the anus, and then it becomes vajrasana. This asana provides siddhi (perfection) to yogis.

It may be wondered why in other meditation asanas the feet are spread out and the knees separated, while in vajrasana the knees remain together. It is for the simple reason that

when the knees remain separated, the thighs are not firm, but remain loose and relaxed. This affects the flow of prana shakti.

In vajrasana, therefore, the flow of prana shakti is different to that of the other meditation asanas. Prana shakti is constantly flowing out of the extreme ends of the body. The objective of any asana, mudra or bandha is to check the outflow of prana shakti and redirect it into the body. In a cross-legged asana, whether siddhasana, padmasana or mukhtasana, the flow of prana shakti keeps on moving from one foot into the body or into the other foot, if the feet remain in contact with each other. This also applies in vajrasana. However, in vajrasana, the vajra nadi is strongly influenced. Vajra nadi is an important pathway for the flow of energy and for carrying the nervous impulses of the reproductive and urinary systems from the brain to other parts of the body. Vajrasana helps to control sexual feelings and redirect the energy towards the development of consciousness.

It is a tradition in India to wash the feet of a saint or sage. In some areas, however, such as Maharashtra and in South India, only the big toes are washed, not the whole foot. According to the tradition of these places, energy is emitted from the big toes and whoever receives that energy, in the form of prasada, is fortunate. There are also many stories in the Puranas relating to the big toes. It is said that the holy Ganges originates from the big toe of Lord Vishnu. This is symbolic of the flow of pure, holy energy which flows from the big toes.

In vajrasana the big toes are connected with one another, resulting in the reunion of prana shakti. A circuit is formed and the prana shakti flows from one foot to the other, filling the soles of the feet. This same energy then influences the mooladhara region, helping to awaken mooladhara chakra.

Practising with the eyes closed and the awareness focused on the breath brings mental peace. The flow of prana takes place smoothly in this asana. In kundalini yoga vajrasana is practised for the awakening of sushumna nadi. It is for this reason that Sage Gheranda says that a yogi attains *siddhi*, perfection, by doing this asana.

VEERASANA: HERO'S POSE

What is the meaning and significance of veerasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Veerasana*, the warrior or hero's pose, is the posture of being on the move, ever ready, and at the same time it is a posture in which deep relaxation can be obtained in a short time.

This practice of half vajrasana opens the nadis and displaces blood from one side of the body to the other. It is very good for the reproductive and abdominal organs and helps clear the mind for mental work. *Veerasana* is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:18):

*Ekam paadamathaikasminvinyasedoorusamsthitam;
Itarasmimstathaa pashchaadveeraasanamiteeritam.*

Placing one foot near the thigh of the other leg and keeping the other foot at the back is called *veerasana*.

Veerasana may also be practised by sitting on the heel so that *mooladhara chakra* is stimulated.

How is veerasana described in the classical hatha yoga texts?

Swami Satyananda: The full name of this asana is *maha-veerasana*, *veerasana* is an abbreviation. *Maha* means 'great', *veer* means 'valiant', or to display heroic power and the ability to subdue. *Mahaveer* is the name of Hanuman, the monkey god who was the great hero of the *Ramayana*. This gives a clear indication of the benefits and purpose of the asana.

There are variations of this asana according to different acharyas of hatha yoga. In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:21) it is described thus:



BSY©

*Ekam paadam tathaikasminvinyaseduruni sthiratam.
Itarasmimstathaa chorum veeraasanamiteeritam.*

Placing one foot by the (opposite) thigh and the other under the (same) thigh is known as veerasana.

This is the traditional posture as described by commentators of the hatha yoga texts.

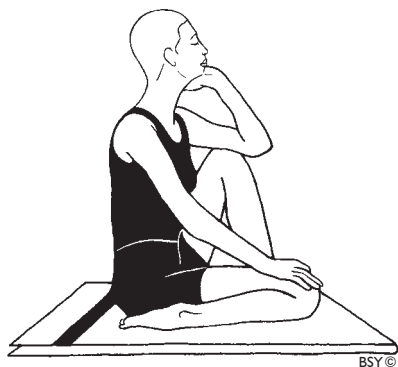
How can the soothing effect of veerasana be deepened?

Swami Niranjanananda: Veerasana with normal breathing is extremely effective for calming a person who is excited and restless. To emphasize the calming effect, use the hand supporting the head to close the right nostril. The posture should be maintained for five minutes.

For meditative purposes, practise slow, deep breathing, imagining that the breath is flowing in and out of *bhrumadhya*, the eyebrow centre. This can be continued for as long as is comfortable.

Why is veerasana sometimes used as a meditation posture?

Swami Niranjanananda: Those who have difficulty sitting in a meditative asana can practise meditation in this posture. When one leg becomes tired, change to the other side. Veerasana gives the benefits of vajrasana. Those who have difficulty sitting in vajrasana, due to tight thigh muscles, pain near the heels or in the knees, can perform veerasana.



In veerasana there is support for the head, which is why one feels mentally calm and relaxed. It is a useful posture for bringing the body into a comfortable position and then practising one-pointedness and focusing the mind. It is useful for those who think too much or who have uncontrollable or disturbed thoughts; the

thinking process becomes clear, precise and subtle, and excess thinking subsides. Veerasana balances the mind, increases the power of concentration, increases awareness of unconscious realms and induces physical and mental relaxation quickly. Therefore, it has also been termed the thinker's pose or the philosopher's pose.

BHADRASANA: GRACIOUS POSE

What is the meaning of bhadrasana?

Swami Satyananda: Bhadra means 'gracious and blessed'. According to Yogi Swatmarama it is also referred to as gorakshasana, and some call it moola bandhasana, but in these postures the foot position varies slightly. Bhadrasana is described in Hatha Yoga Pradipika (1:53–54):

*Gulphau cha vrishanasyaadha seevanyaah paarshvayoh kshipet.
Savyagulpham tathaa savye dakshagulpham tu dakshine.*

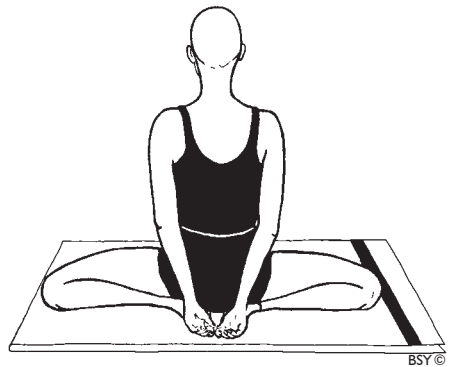
*Paarshvapaadau cha paanibhyaam dhridham baddhvaa
sunishchalam.*

*Bhadraasanam bhavedetatsarvavyaadhivinaashanam.
Gorakshaasanamityaahuridam vai siddhayoginah.*

Place the ankles below the genitals on the sides by the perineum, left ankle on the left (side), right ankle on the right (side). (53)

Then hold the feet, which are on their sides, firmly with the hands and remain motionless. This is bhadrasana which destroys all diseases. The yogis who are perfected (siddhas) call it gorakshasana. (54)

Gorakshasana, as practised today, is slightly different



as the feet are in front of the groin, the balls of the feet on the ground, the heels together pointing upwards. The right hand is placed on the left heel and the left hand on the right heel. Moola bandha asana is also a variation of bhadrasana, in which one sits on the feet with the soles of the feet together, the heels pressing the anus, the sides of the feet pressing the perineum or vagina and the toes pointing out in front. These asana positions are for advanced practitioners and those with very supple ankles.

Why is bhadrasana traditionally identified as a meditation asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Bhadrasana is an excellent meditative asana. The pressure exerted on vajra nadi in the anal region enhances the digestive power. The practices of ashwini and vajroli mudras may occur spontaneously.

The various authors and commentators have regarded different asanas as best for meditation. *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and *Hatharatnavali* recommend four main asanas for meditation: siddhasana, padmasana, simhasana and bhadrasana. The technique described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:10–11) includes mudra and bandha:

*Gulphau cha vrishanasyaadhovvyutkramena samaahitah;
Paadaangushthau karaabhyaam cha dhritvaa vai prishthadeshatah.*

*Jaalandharam samaasaadya naasaagramavalokayet;
Bhadraasanam bhavedetatsarvavyaadhivinaashakam.*



With care, place both heels underneath the testes. (10)

Hold both big toes from behind, adopt jalandhara bandha and gaze at the nosetip. Bhadrasana eradicates all diseases. (11)

This version requires very flexible ankles. A simple variation

is commonly practised today, yet even this variation is predominantly a pose for spiritual aspirants, as by merely adopting this position mooladhara chakra starts to be activated. For spiritual benefits bhadrasana must be performed for extended periods of time, with awareness of mooladhara chakra. Initially, a few minutes daily practice will loosen up the legs and make the feet flexible.

On the pranic level the practice of bhadrasana controls and balances the flow of prana and directs it upwards. Pressure is also exerted in the mooladhara, swadhisthana and manipura regions, making bhadrasana an excellent method of calming the brain and reducing mental excitement.

What are the effects of bhadrasana?

Swami Satyananda: Bhadrasana spontaneously induces moola bandha and tones the reproductive organs, alleviating ailments pertaining to those organs. The benefits of bhadrasana are similar to those of padmasana, siddhasana and vajrasana.

SIMHASANA: LION POSE AND SIMHAGARJANASANA: ROARING LION POSE

Why is simhasana recommended as a meditation posture?

Swami Niranjanananda: The posture of *simhasana*, the lion pose, is a meditation asana in which the lion is sitting quietly, waiting for something to happen. In this asana the spine is extended and the body remains completely steady and alert. This is the mental attitude the mind has to adopt in order to enter deep meditative states.

Generally *simhasana* is associated with *simhagarjanasana*,



BSY ©

the roaring lion, but the Yoga Upanishads give the roaring lion posture as a variation. Simhasana is used where the mind has to be fixed in order to go deep into meditative states.

The position of the feet under the perineum requires flexible ankles, but does produce strong stimulation of the pelvic floor, raising the level of alertness and energy. Perhaps it is strongly recommended as a meditation practice for this reason as it definitely wakes one up.

How is simhasana described in the hatha yoga texts?

Swami Niranjanananda: Simhasana as described by Sage Gheranda, is similar to that described in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* as one of the four most important meditation asanas. In *Gheranda Samhita* (2:15–16) simhasana is described:

*Gulphau cha vrishanasyaadho vyutkramenordhvataam gatau;
Chitiyugmam bhoomisamstham karau cha jaanunopari.*

*Vyaattavaktro jalandhrena naasaagramavalokayet;
Simhaasanam bhavedetatsarvavyaadhivinaashakam.*

Placing the upturned heels of both feet crosswise underneath the testes, have the knees on the ground, the hands on the knees and open the mouth. (15)

Perform jalandhara bandha, fixing the gaze at the eyebrow centre or at the nosetip. This asana by the name of simhasana eradicates all diseases. (16)

The verse says that jalandhara bandha should be practised, implying breath retention, and the gaze fixed at the nosetip. In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:50–52), a hand mudra is specified and the three bandhas are mentioned:

*Gulphau cha vrishanasyaadha seevanyaah paarshvayoh kshipet.
Dakshine savyagulpham tu dakshagulpham tu savyake.*

*Hastau tu jaanvoh samsthaapya svaanguleeh samprasaarya cha.
Vyaattavaktro nireeksheta naasaagram susamaahitah.*

*Simhaasanam bhavedetatpoojitam yogipungavaih.
Bandhatritayasandhaanam kurute chaasanottamam.*

Place the ankles below the scrotum, right ankle on the left side, left ankle on the right side of the perineum. (50)

Place the palms on the knees, fingers spread apart, keep the mouth open and gaze at the nosetip with a concentrated mind. (51)

This is simhasana, held in great esteem by the highest yogis. This most excellent asana facilitates the three bandhas. (52)

The bandhas are moola bandha, uddiyana bandha and jalandhara bandha.

The pressure of the feet induces moola bandha and facilitates concentration at mooladhara. The inclusion of jalandhara bandha, as with siddhasana, suggests that one moves into deep states of meditation where the breathing rate slows and the spontaneous suspension of breath between inhalation and exhalation extends. Uddiyana bandha indicates that the exhalation (whether audible or not) is deep and extended, with the abdomen being drawn in towards the spine, assisting full exhalation. When the three bandhas occur spontaneously without any strain, as an expression of the state of mind, the healing and invigorating effects are profound.

For those who do not have sufficient flexibility for the full posture described by the sages, a simplified version of simhasana is generally taught.

Why is simhasana an important asana for helping one develop stability?

Swami Niranjanananda: In this posture there is a definite extension of the spinal cord and the body is absolutely fixed. There is total physical stability. The whole weight of the body is not on any one specific part. There is more pressure in the frontal region of the body, not in the back or in the buttocks. The arms act like levers, providing support for the body. Spiritually, the focus is placed on vishuddhi or ajna chakra.

How does simhasana expand the breathing area?

Swami Niranjanananda: This pose differs from vajrasana in that it is not closed but open. The knees are spread apart and the hands placed between the knees. The pelvis is put into a position which redistributes the pressure on the internal organs, freeing the abdomen, allowing the body to tilt forwards and taking weight off the abdomen and diaphragm, thereby improving respiration.

By arching the back, the energy being generated in the abdomen is directed towards the head. Consequently there is a backward bending effect on the spinal cord, as well as the freeing of a lot of tension from the chest and diaphragm.

What are the effects of the mudras practised in simhasana and bhadrasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Bhadrasana is a similar practice to simhasana. The posture is the same, except that the hands are placed on top of the knees and the gaze is directed to the nosetip instead of the eyebrow centre. The spine is maintained upright and the head is straight. This posture is used mainly for sitting for extended periods in meditation or other techniques.

In both simhasana and bhadrasana, the optic system, which occupies a large part of the brain at the back of the head, is affected. The normal function of the eyes is to look around gathering information from the environment. When one gazes at a certain point, a large part of the brain is stilled and this has very important ramifications for one's psychophysiology, sense of identity and sense of connection to the world. Fixing the gaze is one of the most direct ways of influencing the central nervous system.

Mudra is the key technique in simhasana. It acts on the cerebral cortex and concentrates the prana. The concentration of the eyes and the optic nerves is an aid to higher concentration, stopping sensory distraction. Once the sensory distractions can be controlled it is much easier

to induce the state of *pratyahara*, the dissociation of the mind from sensory experiences.

In *shambhavi* and *nasikagra*, one looks up towards the eyebrow centre and down towards the nosetip respectively, not out to the sides, as this is the best way to lock the eyes. By focusing the gaze on a central point, whether at the eyebrow centre, which represents the top of the spinal cord, or at the nosetip, which represents mooladhara chakra, the central nervous system is switched on, and the core structures around the limbic/hypothalamic system are influenced.

Just by closing the eyes, alpha waves are generated in the optic system at the back of the head. By crossing the eyes in a meditative attitude, alpha waves spread from the back of the head to the frontal lobes, producing a profound meditative or relaxed state very quickly. These techniques are extremely powerful and should only be practised by more advanced practitioners who are able to cope with the effects as they occur.



BSY©

What is the effect of the hand position in simhasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: According to the principles of reflexology, the strong pressure on the palms helps to relieve stress and tension, improve the blood supply, tone the nerves and balance the vital energy necessary for mastering meditation techniques.

How is simhasana practised with khechari mudra?

Swami Niranjanananda: While practising the simple variation of simhasana, after performing shambhavi mudra, perform *khechari mudra*, the tongue lock. Inhale slowly and deeply through the nose. At the end of inhalation, release the tongue, open the mouth and extend the tongue as far as possible.

What are the effects of the variations of simhasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Generally, simhasana is associated with the roaring lion pose. Simhagarjanasana is a popular externalizing practice which releases a lot of stress and lightens the mood. The Upanishads classify it as a variation of simhasana.

According to *Gheranda Samhita*, jalandhara bandha is part of the practice, implying breath retention, and fixing of the gaze at the nosetip. To incorporate this in the roaring lion posture, inhale slowly through the nose and slowly exhale through the mouth with the 'aaaah' sound. After making the sound, retain the breath outside and practise jalandhara bandha and nosetip gazing simultaneously.



This variation of simhagarjanasana should not be practised until one is comfortable with jalandhara bandha and kumbhaka as independent practices. It should only be practised in this way with an experienced guide. The effect of the asana is no longer so light-hearted and extroverting due to the influence of kumbhaka and the force of nasikagra drishti.

How does simhagarjanasana influence the voice?

Swami Niranjanananda: The roaring lion pose is an excellent asana for the throat, nose, ears, eyes and mouth. Tension is removed from the chest and diaphragm. Simhagarjanasana is useful for people who stutter or who are nervous and introverted. It develops a strong and beautiful voice.

What is the ideal time to practise simhasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the yogic scriptures it says that simhasana is best done at sunrise, facing the sun with the mouth open so that the rays of the sun enter the throat. The

sun's rays make the throat, tonsils, nerves and muscles of the throat healthy and strong. However, this asana may be performed at any time.

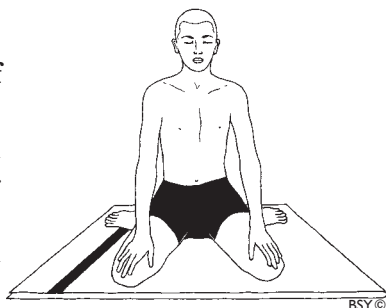
MANDUKI ASANA: POSE OF THE FROG

What is the meaning of manduki asana?

Swami Satyananda: The word *manduki* means 'frog'. This asana is so named because the sitting posture resembles a frog at rest.

What is the purpose of manduki asana?

Swami Satyananda: Manduki asana is a counterpose for cross-legged meditation asanas. It is the asana used when practising manduki mudra.



SHASHANKASANA: POSE OF THE MOON

What are the physiological benefits of shashankasana?

Swami Satyananda: Shashankasana is a reasonably simple asana yet it gives many benefits. Most people have stiff backs. Shashankasana stretches the back muscles and separates the individual vertebrae from each other. This releases pressure on the discs that keep the vertebrae apart. Often nerve connections emanating from the spinal cord are squeezed by these discs, giving rise to various forms of backache and sciatica. The separation of the discs during shashankasana helps to relieve these pains and encourages the discs to resume their correct locations. The stretch imparted to the back muscles removes sluggish and depleted blood. On completing the asana fresh blood is soaked up into the muscles in the same way that water is absorbed by a sponge. This regenerates both the back muscles and the all important spinal nerves.

The deep breathing in the final position applies a gentle yet powerful massage to the abdominal organs. As such, this asana is useful in helping to remove and prevent various abdominal disorders such as constipation and indigestion.

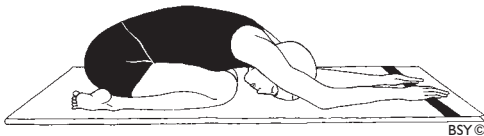
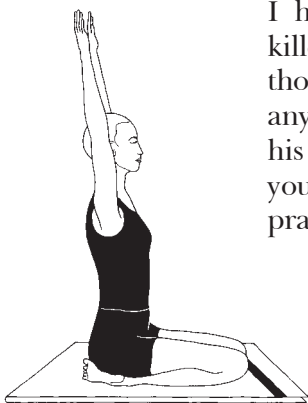
How does shashankasana help the management of anger?

Swami Satyananda: About forty years ago, I had a confrontation with my guru, Swami Sivananda. He was a calm, quiet, forgiving, forbearing, enduring and compassionate swami, but somehow I got angry. I was young in those days, twenty-one. I threw the bunch of keys at his feet and said, "Look after your own ashram!" Then I went to my room and closed the door. I was so angry I did not know what to do. For two days I did not come out of my room and I did not eat anything.

On the third day, he called me and said, "You are very angry." I said, "Yes." He said, "Don't be sorry about it; find a way." I said, "But I have been thinking about it so much. Every morning I make a resolve that I will not get angry, I will not lose my temper, but later I forget it." He said, "Your energies are in disarray." So he taught me one yoga posture called shashankasana and told me to practise it for as long as I could.

I practised that asana first for ten minutes at one stretch, then later I used to practise it for three hours, because for me there was no other problem during my youth except anger.

I had so much anger that I could have killed anybody. I couldn't control it. So I thought, 'If I can control anger, I can control anything in life.' Of course, everybody has his own problem. My problem was anger; your problem may be something else. I practised shashankasana and it did help me.



BSY ©

Earlier than that, I practised many different systems. I studied in a convent school with Christian sisters who used to teach me that when you get angry, you should not do this and you should do that, but nothing worked. The swamis or priests in India used to tell me, 'When you get angry, drink water.' Everybody suggested every possible method. Once I got so angry with my father because he told me not to go out in the evening, I took a rifle and threatened to shoot him. This was the type of anger I had, but by the practice of shashankasana, it was finished. How?

This anger was not a psychological process. It was a process related to the glandular balance. In shashankasana, what happens? With the forward bend there is tension or stimulus created in the adrenal glands and they secrete a little more or a little less adrenalin according to the requirement of the system. When the adrenalin is injected and absorbed by the system, the chemistry in the body changes and the behaviour of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous system also changes.

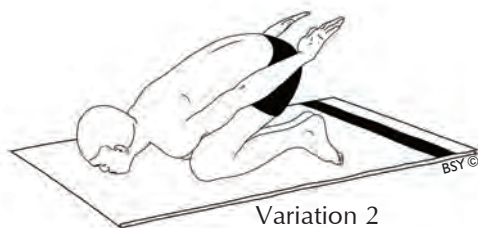
Everyone becomes angry. It takes a mere second to feel anger but far longer to regain normality. Deep and slow breathing helps to calm anger. Shashankasana induces this and quickly brings about relaxation. Breath awareness accentuates this process by drawing the thoughts away from the cause of the anger. The by-product of emotional upsets such as anger is over stimulation of the adrenal glands. These two glands inject adrenalin directly into the bloodstream causing overactivity of the bodily functions, resulting in feelings of stress. Shashankasana regulates these organs, helping to bring about a relaxed mind and body.

When there is balance between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, there is calmness and tranquillity. The science of hatha yoga



Variation 1

BSY ©



Variation 2

recognizes this relationship between the body, mind, emotions, intellect and feelings; they are not considered to be different from each other. Mental problems,

conflicts, psychosis, schizophrenia, anger, excessive passions, lack of memory, absence of coordination, exhaustion, guilt, or even lack of passion, may be due to a faulty system in the body.

What is the effect of relaxation on memory?

Swami Niranjanananda: Research was conducted on the effects of children practising shashankasana. The children practised ten rounds of shashankasana every day. That takes about five minutes to do. It was discovered that by practising this asana the memory improves.

Why? In the body there are many glands which secrete hormones for the development of the physical body, brain and mind. Shashankasana has a direct influence on the major endocrine glands of the body, particularly the adrenal glands. When the adrenal gland is active, one becomes agitated. When a regulated outflow of the adrenal hormones can be maintained, mental agitation and dissipation are significantly reduced. One is able to focus better, and the memory improves.

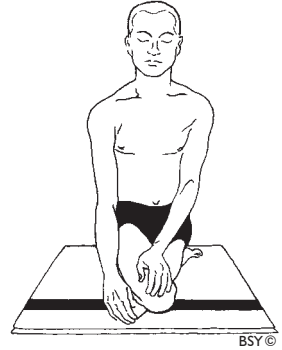
SANKATASANA: POSE FOR TROUBLE

What are the meaning and purpose of sankatasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Sankat* means difficulty, trouble or danger. For those not comfortable in vajrasana, it is a difficult asana. However, for those who find it comfortable, this posture conserves energy and gives a heightened state of alertness. It is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:29):

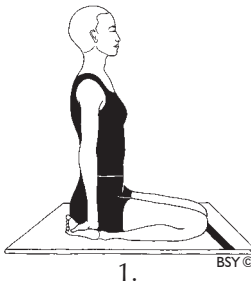
*Vaamapaadachitermoolam vinyasya
dharaneetale;
Paada dandenayaamyena
veshtayedvaamapaadakam;
Jaanuyugme
karayugmetatsankataasanam.*

Keeping the part of the left leg below the knee on the floor, wrap the right leg around the left leg and then place both hands on the knees. This is called sankatasana.

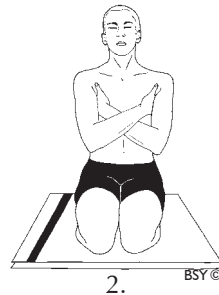


ADDITIONAL ASANAS FROM VAJRASANA GROUP

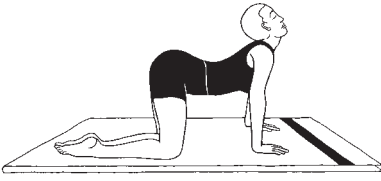
1. Ananda Madirasana (intoxicating bliss pose)
2. Padadhiraana (breath balancing pose)
3. Marjari-asana (cat stretch pose) Sequence
4. Vyaghrasana (tiger pose) Sequence
5. Shashank Bhujangasana (striking cobra pose)
6. Naman Pranamasana (prostration pose)
7. Ashva Sanchalanasana (equestrian pose)
8. Ardha Ushtrasana (half camel pose)
9. Ushtrasana (camel pose)
10. Supta Vajrasana (sleeping thunderbolt pose)
11. Supta Vajrasana (sleeping thunderbolt pose) Variation
12. Utthan mandukasana (upright frog pose)



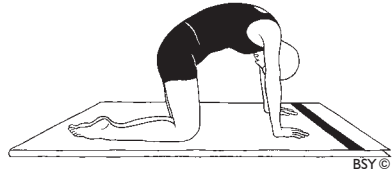
1.



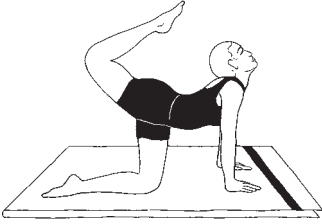
2.



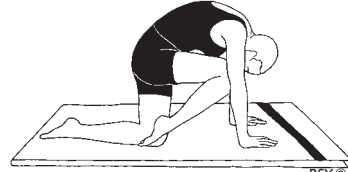
3.



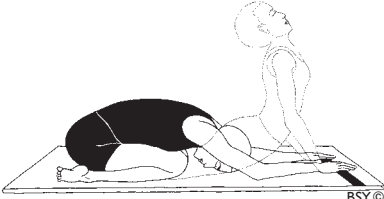
BSY ©



4.

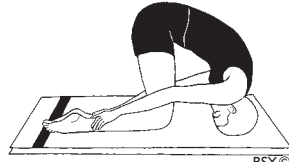


BSY ©



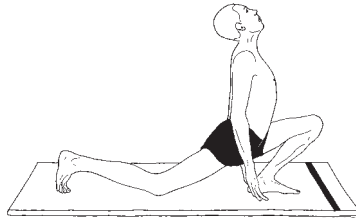
5.

BSY ©



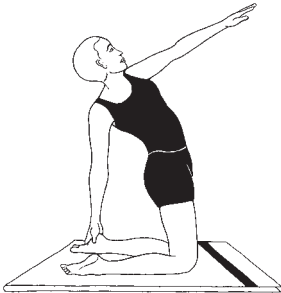
6.

BSY ©



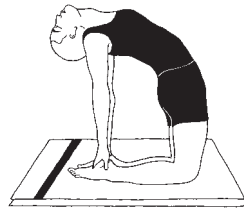
7.

BSY ©



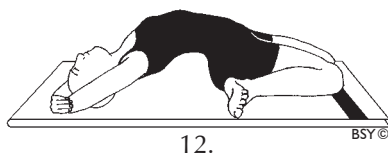
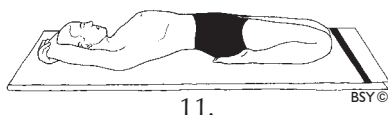
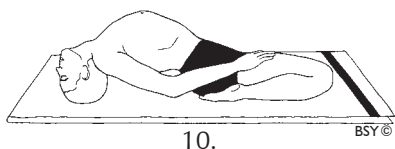
8.

BSY ©



9.

BSY ©



STANDING ASANAS

What are the benefits of the standing asanas?

Swami Satyananda: The standing series of asanas has a stretching and strengthening effect on the back, shoulders and leg muscles. They are particularly useful for those who spend a lot of time sitting down or who have stiffness or pain in the back. They improve posture, balance and muscular coordination. They also strengthen the muscles used to keep the back straight during meditation and increase oxygenation and lung capacity.

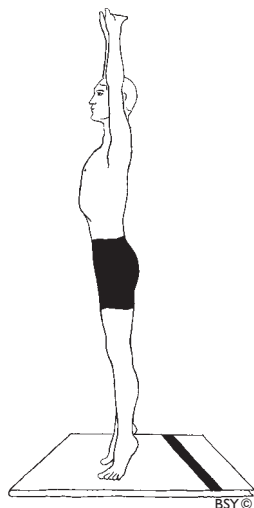
Those who suffer from sciatica or slipped disc may practise hasta utthanasana, akarna dhanurasana and tadasana, but should not practise any of the other standing asanas except under the guidance of a competent teacher. The specific contra-indications for each practice should be observed.

TADASANA: PALM TREE POSE

Why is tadasana an important posture?

Swami Niranjanananda: One of the movements of the body is traction, stretching up. The practice of tadasana stretches every joint and muscle upwards and releases accumulated tension.

Traction is something one rarely does in daily activity. Maybe if something has to be reached on top of a closet, one momentarily stretches up to bring that object down, but that is the maximum traction performed in daily life. The controlled movement of traction helps release tensions, and induces a free flow of blood through the different joints and muscles of the body.

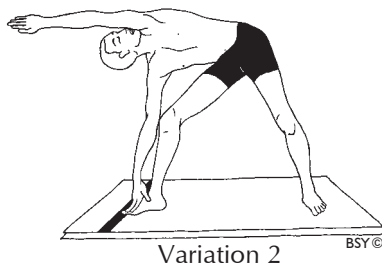
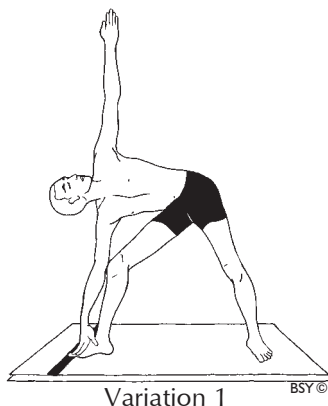


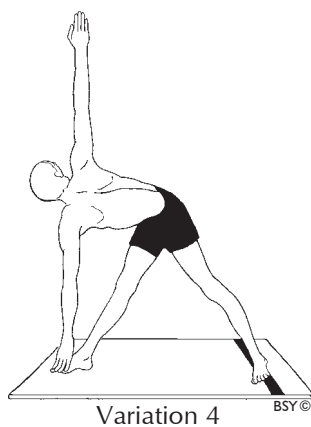
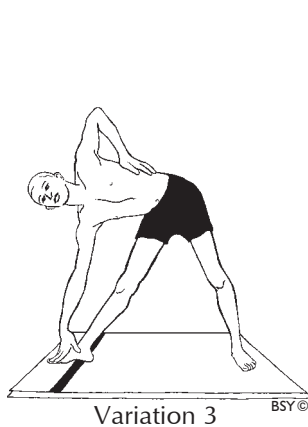
Tadasana stretches the entire body which helps to release pain, tensions and stiffness from the joints so that the body becomes charged with vitality again. By practising ten rounds of tadasana when feeling low in energy or lacking in stamina, one becomes dynamic instead of tired.

TRIKONASANA: TRIANGLE POSE

What are the benefits of trikonasana?

Swami Sivananda: Trikonasana gives good lateral movement to the spine. It is an auxiliary to ardha matsyendrasana; it amplifies and fulfils matsyendrasana. With a healthy spine one can sit in a meditation asana for many hours without



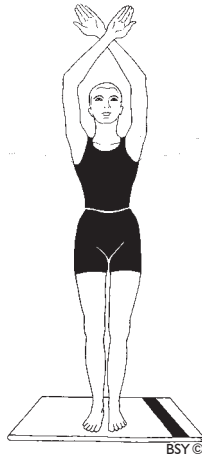
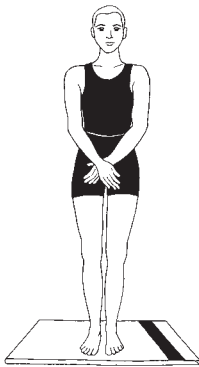


fatigue. For a yogi the spine is most important as it is connected with the spinal cord and the sympathetic system. It is the spine that contains the important sushumna nadi which plays a vital part in the movement of kundalini. This asana tones the spinal nerves and the abdominal organs, increases peristalsis of the bowels and invigorates appetite. Constipation is relieved. The body becomes light. Those who suffer from shortening of the leg due to fracture of the hip or thigh bone or bones of the leg will benefit from this asana as it lengthens the legs.

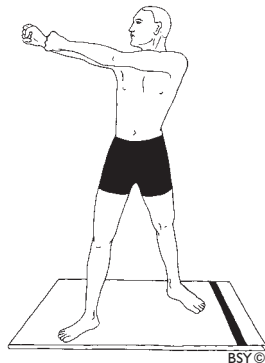
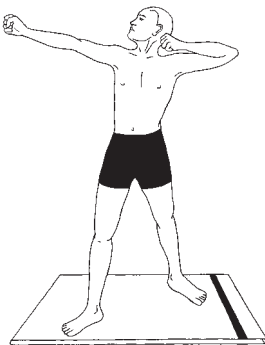
ADDITIONAL ASANAS FROM THE STANDING GROUP

1. Bandha Hasta Utthanasana (locked hand raising pose) Sequence
2. Akarna Dhanurasana (bow and arrow pose) Sequence
3. Tiryak Tadasana (swaying palm tree pose)
4. Kati Chakrasana (waist rotating pose)
5. Tiryak Kati Chakrasana (swaying waist rotating pose)
6. Meru Prishthasana (spine and back pose)
7. Meru Prishthasana (spine and back pose) Variation
8. Utthanasana (squat and rise pose)

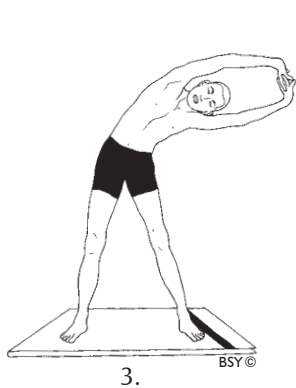
9. Druta Utkatasana (dynamic energy pose)
10. Virabhadrasana (warrior pose)
11. Akramanasana (attacking pose)
12. Samakonasana (right angle pose)
13. Dwikonasana (double angle pose)
14. Utthita Lolasana (swinging while standing pose)
- Sequence
15. Dolasana (pendulum pose)



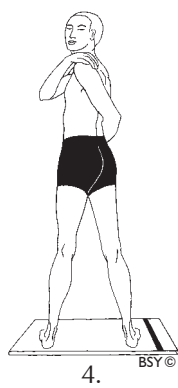
1.



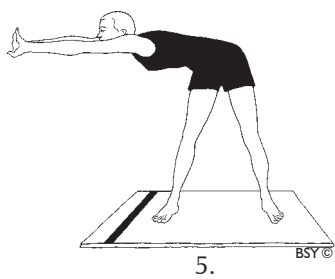
2.



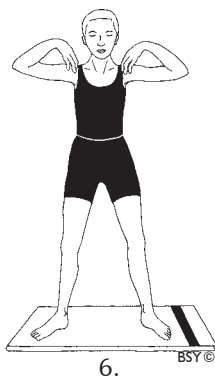
3.



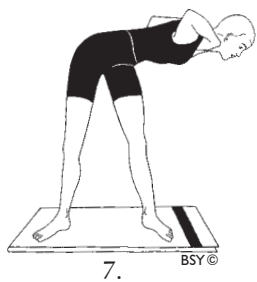
4.



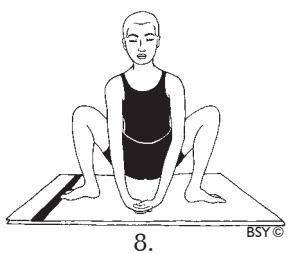
5.



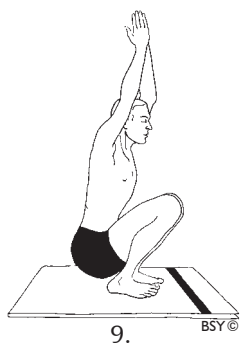
6.



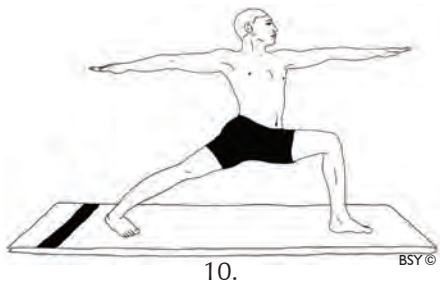
7.



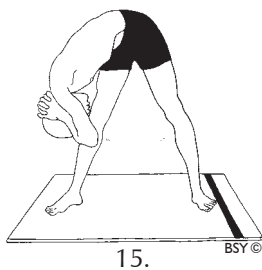
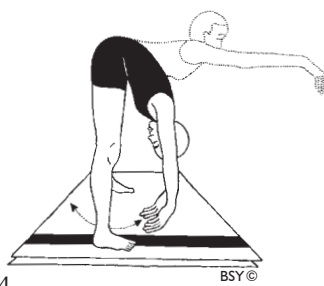
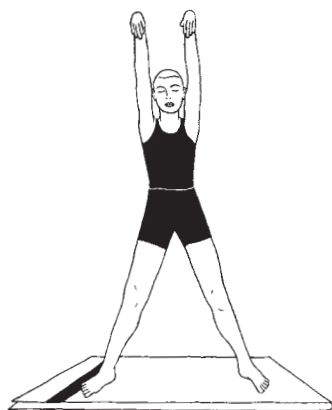
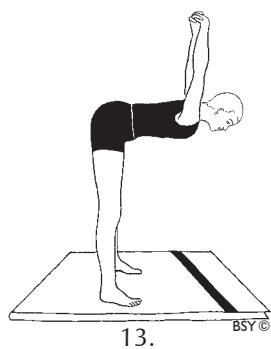
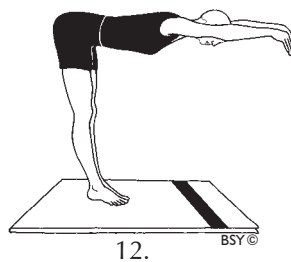
8.



9.



10.



SURYA NAMASKARA

What is surya namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: Surya namaskara is a series of twelve physical postures. These alternating backward and forward bending asanas flex and stretch the spinal column and limbs through their maximum range. The series gives such a profound stretch to the whole of the body that few other forms of exercise can be compared with it.

What is the meaning and significance of surya namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: The Sanskrit name *surya* here refers to the sun and *namaskara* means 'salutations'. Surya namaskara has been handed down from the enlightened sages of the vedic age. The sun symbolizes spiritual consciousness and in ancient times was worshipped on a daily basis. Worship of the outer and inner sun was a religio-social ritual which attempted to placate those forces of nature beyond human control. In yoga the sun is represented by *pingala* or *surya nadi*, the pranic channel which carries the vital, life-giving force.

Surya namaskara is composed of three elements: form, energy and rhythm. The twelve postures create the physical matrix around which the form of the practice is woven. These postures generate *prana*, the subtle energy which activates the psychic body. Their performance, in a steady, rhythmic sequence, reflects the rhythms of the universe: the twenty-four hours of the day, the twelve zodiac phases of the year and the biorhythms of the body. The application of this form and rhythm to the body-mind complex generates the transforming force which produces a fuller and more dynamic life, and a greater appreciation of the world we live in.

What are the origins of surya namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: This dynamic group of asanas is not a traditional part of hatha yoga practices as it was added to the original asana group at a later time. However, the origins of surya namaskara date far back to the earliest epochs of

history, when human beings first became aware of a spiritual power within themselves that is also reflected in the material universe. This awareness is the foundation of yoga. Surya namaskara can be seen as a form of worship of the sun and all that it represents in the micro and macrocosmic levels.

In yogic terms this indicates that surya namaskara awakens the solar aspects of an individual's nature and releases this vital energy for the development of higher awareness. This can be realized by the practice of surya namaskara each morning, as well as being a fine way to pay tribute to the source of creation and life, thereby carrying on the solar tradition.

What is the purpose of surya namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: Surya namaskara is an effective way of loosening up, stretching, massaging and toning all the joints, muscles and internal organs of the body. It is an excellent group of asanas with which to start morning practice. Its versatility and application make it one of the most useful methods of inducing a healthy, vigorous and active life, while at the same time preparing for spiritual awakening and the resulting expansion of awareness.

When is the best time to practise surya namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: The ideal time to practise surya namaskara is at sunrise, the most peaceful time of day, or sunset. Whenever possible practise in the open air, facing the rising sun.

How should one mentally prepare for the practice of surya namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: Before commencing the practice, stand with the feet together or slightly apart, and the arms hanging loosely by the sides of the body. Close the eyes gently and become aware of the whole physical body as one homogeneous unit. Minimize swaying movements and balance the body weight equally on both feet. Take the awareness to the soles of the feet in contact with the floor. Feel that the

whole body is being pulled downwards by gravity and that any tensions are being pulled down through the body and into the ground. At the same time, experience the vital force surging up from the earth and flooding the whole being.

Bring the awareness inside the body and mentally begin to relax it. Starting from the top of the head, take the awareness systematically through all the parts, releasing any tension. Intensify once more the awareness of the whole physical body and feel in harmony with it. Finally, take the awareness to the heart or eyebrow centre and visualize a brilliant, red rising sun infusing the whole body and mind with its vitalizing and healing rays.

How can the pranic effect be maximized when practising surya namaskara?

Swami Niranjanananda: When practising surya namaskara one can simply go through the twelve asanas without any problem and feel energetic and good. That is correct in one sense, but when it comes to doing yoga correctly, there has to be more. In each posture a pressure point has to be focused on in a particular area of the body. That is the point where an added stretch, pull and tension is felt, so that the nerves in that particular area are stimulated. This can be described as chakra concentration.

Where does one concentrate, for example, in position two? Vishuddhi, although the stretch is emphasized in the lower back. Some people think that if the stretch is in the lower back, the concentration should be on the lower back, but this is not the case. A student might be stretching one hundred percent in the lower back and putting the head slightly back – managing only ten percent of the curve. If, however, that curve becomes twenty percent, that is the actual yoga posture. From ten one should go to twenty, from twenty to thirty, and from thirty to forty percent.

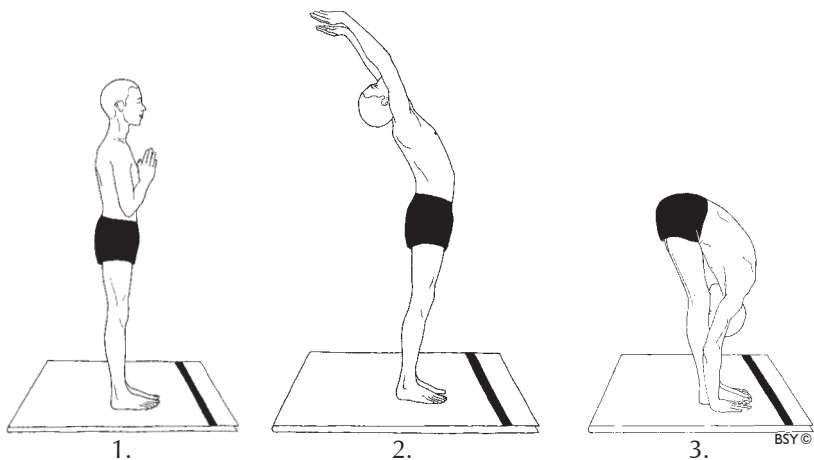
Creating pranic activity in the area of a particular chakra is the actual aim of asana and this has to be learned under the guidance of the guru.

Why is it important to spend time in shavasana after practising surya namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: After completing surya namaskara, *shavasana*, the yogic pose of relaxation, should be practised with breath awareness. The relaxation period following surya namaskara is an important part of the practice as it allows the body time for readjustment and removal of any toxins which have been released into the bloodstream during the practice.

In surya namaskara some exertion is required to perform the sequence of postures. This results in increased heart rate and deep breathing, which indicate arousal of the sympathetic nervous system. The relaxation in shavasana allows the parasympathetic system to operate, reversing the effects of arousal and returning the body to a balanced state.

Through the combination of surya namaskara and shavasana both aspects of the autonomic nervous system are stimulated and consequently the whole body is revitalized. The period of relaxation should last at least until the heartbeat and breath return to normal and all tension has been released from the muscles.



How is chakra awareness practised during surya namaskara?

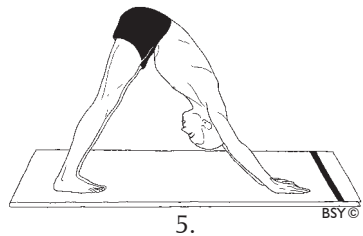
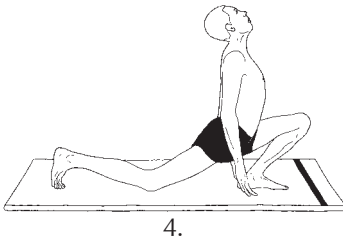
Swami Satyananda: When one is adept at the asana and pranayama components of surya namaskara, awareness of a chakra is superimposed during each asana. The asanas and their associated chakras are: 1. and 12. pranamasana – anahata chakra; 2. and 11. hasta utthanasana – vishuddhi chakra; 3. and 10. padahasthasana – swadhisthana chakra; 4. and 9. ashwa sanchalanasana – ajna chakra; 5. and 8. parvatasana – vishuddhi chakra; 6. ashtanga namaskara – manipura chakra; and 7. bhujangasana – swadhisthana chakra.

While practising each asana one endeavours to locate the relevant chakra and develop concentration on that centre. As proficiency in chakra awareness and visualization improve, the process of asana, pranayama and chakra awareness is fused. The breath can be used to increase stimulation of the chakras.

In the practice of surya namaskara all the chakras are mentally touched except mooladhara. This develops the other chakras in preparation for the awakening of kundalini from mooladhara. The body must be strong and healthy in order to withstand the power of mooladhara awakening which is associated with the release of powerful, unconscious forces. Surya namaskara increases vitality in preparation for this event.

How is mantra included in the practice of surya namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: Chakra concentration may be combined with mental repetition of specific mantras, by feeling that



BSY®

the mantra is being repeated in or on the chakra. When the practitioner's concentration develops to a higher degree the vibrations of the mantras may be felt to be issuing forth from the psychic centres, a most wonderful and intense experience.

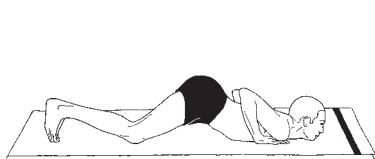
The mantras used may be either the twelve names of the sun, known as the *surya* mantras or six *bija*, seed, mantras.

Every year the sun passes through twelve different phases, known as the signs of the zodiac in Western astrology, and as the *rashis* in Hindu astrology. According to Hindu astrology each rashi has specific attributes or moods, and in each of these twelve moods the sun is given a different name. These twelve names comprise the twelve sun mantras, which are mentally repeated in the correct order in conjunction with the twelve movements of *surya namaskara*.

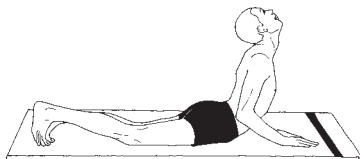
These mantras are not merely names of the sun, every sound syllable contained within them is the vehicle of a basic eternal energy represented by the sun itself. By repetition and concentration on these mantras, the whole mental structure is benefited and uplifted.

An alternative to the twelve names of the sun is repetition of a series of *bija* mantras. These mantras are evocative sounds that have no literal meaning in themselves, but set up powerful vibrations of energy within the mind and body. The six *bija* mantras are repeated four times during one complete round of *surya namaskara*.

Either the *bija* or the sun mantras can be recited aloud or mentally, depending mainly on the inclination of the practitioner and the speed of practice. If the speed is



6.



7.

BSY ©

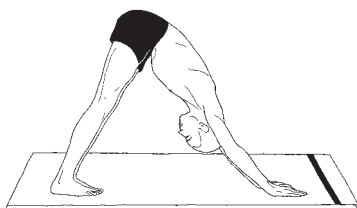
quite slow, the sun mantras can be combined with chakra awareness. If the speed is a little faster, the bija mantras can be used in the same way. If the physical movements are done a little more quickly, either the mantras can be recited alone without chakra rotation, or the awareness can be rotated through the chakras without the mantra.

What is the effect of surya namaskara on pingala nadi?

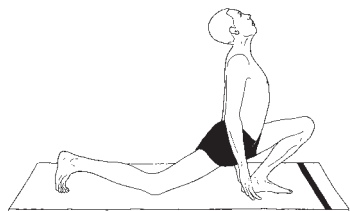
Swami Satyananda: Surya namaskara has a direct vitalizing effect on the solar energy of the body which flows through pingala nadi. Regular practice of surya namaskara regulates pingala nadi, whether it is underactive or overactive. Regulation of pingala nadi leads to a balanced energy system at both the mental and physical levels.

The benefits gained through regular practice of surya namaskara far surpass ordinary physical exercise and yet at the same time they enhance sports and other forms of physical recreation. This is due to the direct vitalizing effect on the solar energies of the body, centred at manipura chakra and flowing in pingala nadi. At the same time, when the asanas are performed with pranayama or in concert with yogic sadhana, they lead to a balanced system of energies at both the physical and mental levels.

Surya namaskara forms a basic part of the ongoing release of pranic energy and the balancing of pingala nadi. A healthy body and an active life are the basis for spiritual development. Unless the physical component can be balanced and integrated into the total structure of a human being, awakening of the inner light cannot occur. Evolution,



8.



9.

BSY©

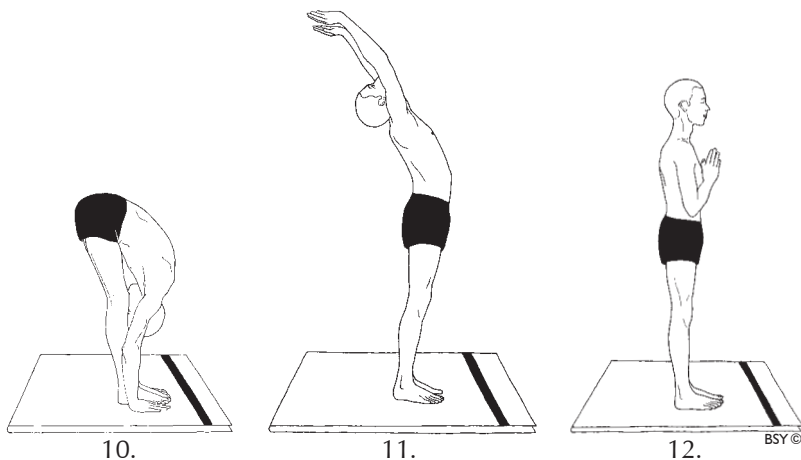
especially on the spiritual level, requires balance, otherwise darkness and ignorance continue to prevail.

How can surya namaskara become a complete sadhana?

Swami Satyananda: Surya namaskara becomes a complete *sadhana*, spiritual practice, in itself when it includes asana, pranayama, mantra and meditation techniques. The body is composed of matter and energy. The actual physical movements forward and backward are enough to enhance metabolism and release energy. When combined with chakra stimulation the effects are further enhanced.

The spinal cord, the link between the brain and the body, is the conduit for all our energies. Within it are the ida and pingala nadis, so its health is of paramount importance. Surya namaskara, being an active and dynamic series, exerts its major influence on pingala nadi, especially when practised quickly. However, when practised slowly and completely with chakras and mantras, it stimulates both ida and pingala almost equally, depending on the practitioner's abilities.

When surya namaskara is practised slowly, less emphasis is given to pingala nadi and more time is given to mental development. The practice transforms itself from a series



of asanas to a series of mudras leading to a more balanced development. It is for this reason that a combination of both fast and slow practice is recommended, for most people require a little extra pingala stimulation and refinement, due to the nature of modern lifestyles. Before delving into the human psyche with mudras or meditation, the body must be made strong and healthy. The channels for the elimination of impurities must be free.

The pranic channels of the body are cleansed by the enhancement and control of the movement of prana in the body. As each asana aids and accentuates the natural flow of prana up and down, blockages are removed. After the series is completed, these flows move with greater ease and improve body functions. This is constructive channelling of energy rather than allowing it to dissipate.

Constructive channelling, or rather rechannelling due to the unblocking effect, is enhanced by manipura chakra stimulation. Manipura is profoundly affected by the practice and at the same time lends power to the flows of energy in pingala nadi.

What are the psychodynamics of surya namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: Each of the surya namaskara asanas conveys an image to the archetypal depths of one's mind. For example, the image of a cobra has a powerful and dynamic, pingala-type effect. There can be few more powerful and hypnotically awesome creatures in the world. The images conveyed by the mountain pose, the equestrian pose, and the raised-arm pose are also dynamic. It is a beautiful and aesthetic quality of surya namaskara that it encapsulates such dynamic images within each posture.

Pranamasana, as the first and last pose of the series, marks the beginning and end of the transit of the sun's passage from dawn to dusk. As such it represents the peace, tranquillity and beauty of the sunrise and sunset. It is the calm of the two spiritual times of the day when the forces of dark and light, ida and pingala, merge and produce the third force of

sushumna, the spiritual light. Thus, pranamasana creates the situation for mental flexibility, from the time when one can be at peace with oneself in order to gather resources before diving into the world, until the time of emerging at the end of the day, having used up energy in daily activity. As this asana is performed with exhalation, this indicates at once introversion and giving of oneself to the world.

From pranamasana one moves to hasta utthanasana in which the hands and head stretch up to their highest point. From this point on, the head and body will gradually move downward so that at the middle of the series the body is at its lowest position, while the sun is at its highest. Hasta utthanasana can then be seen to indicate the drawing in of the energy of the newly risen sun, not only via the breath, but through every pore in the body. This energy is used to dive into the busy daily life, as represented by the next asana, padahastanasana.

Asanas such as padahastanasana and parvatasana seem to represent introversion, yet they are rather more symbolic of the introspection necessary to carry out one's daily duties, than the deep sense withdrawal of pratyahara. They provide a balance to the extroversion so characteristic of daily life. Padahastanasana precedes ashwa sanchalanasana, giving the feeling of looking inside for the inspiration and answers to the problems which have to be faced squarely and bravely in daily life. After looking to the heavens for inspiration, one looks to the earth for balance and stability.

Ashwa sanchalanasana represents the power and courage required to face the problems of life and the self-confidence which arises when one has looked within and made contact with the inner guide – ajna.

Ashtanga namaskara represents one's energies at their lowest ebb. When the sun is at its extremity, either at noon or at midnight, is one's most vulnerable period, for this is the time of inertia, or *tamas*, when most people feel the need for rest or sleep. As such, this asana represents our complete surrender to the power of the midday sun.

Bhujangasana represents awakening from sleep. The arising of knowledge from ignorance, the awakening of the rajasic vital energy out of the inertia of *tamas*. When the serpent, representing wisdom, arises, the ascent towards a spiritual, *sattvic* state begins.

Therefore, it is seen that through the synchronized journey of the physical sun through the various degrees of the heavens, the asanas can represent the state of one's vital energies, of the *pingala nadi*, from their peak at dawn, to their lowest point at midday, and again to a peak at dusk.

This interpretation is only one of many possibilities. The use of such images lends power and depth to the practice and lifts it out of the purely physical. It is images such as these, and their contemplation, which shifts the balance of mental awareness away from the negative, towards the positive. When these are combined with the physical wellbeing experienced due to *pingala nadi* stimulation, the mental effects are reinforced.

As an exercise in contemplation, each asana can be visualized so that the effects of each image can be felt. This gives added depth to the practice, enabling each practitioner to discover their own intuitive experience of *surya namaskara*. In this way *surya namaskara* becomes a matrix upon which to turn and transform the mind.

CHANDRA NAMASKARA

What is the difference between *surya namaskara* and *chandra namaskara*?

Swami Satyananda: The word *chandra* means 'moon'. Just as the moon, having no light of its own, reflects the light of the sun, so the practice of *chandra namaskara* reflects that of *surya namaskara*. The sequence of asanas is the same as *surya namaskara* except that *ardha chandrasana*, the half moon pose, is performed after *ashwa sanchalanasana*, the equestrian pose. This is a significant change. The posture develops balance and concentration, which adds another dimension to the practice.

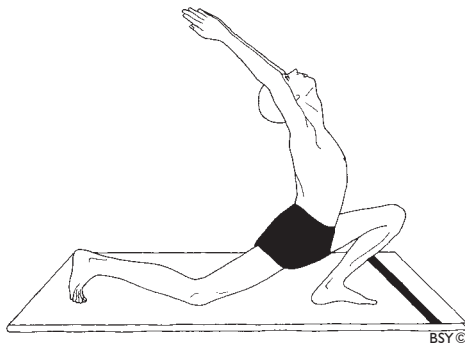
It also makes the breathing pattern more demanding, prolonging inhalation and exhalation/retention.

Also, chandra namaskara is practised with the left leg leading – that is, in the first half of the round the left leg is taken back during positions four and nine, while in the second half of the round the right leg leads. This is the opposite to surya namaskara. The left side is associated with *ida nadi*, the lunar force in the body.

What symbolism is associated with chandra namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: Whereas the twelve positions of surya namaskara relate to the twelve zodiac or solar phases of the year, the fourteen positions of chandra namaskara relate to the fourteen lunar phases. In the lunar calendar the fourteen days before the full moon are known as *shukla paksha*, the bright fortnight, and the fourteen days after the full moon are known as *krishna paksha*, the dark fortnight.

The lunar energy flows within *ida nadi*. It has cool, relaxing and creative qualities. *Ida* is the introverted, feminine or mental force which is responsible for consciousness.



When is the best time to practise chandra namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: Chandra namaskara is best practised in the evening or at night, especially when the moon is visible, or at dawn at the time of the full moon. When practising at night, ensure that the stomach is empty.

How can one mentally prepare for practising chandra namaskara?

Swami Satyananda: Before beginning chandra namaskara, a few moments should be given to prepare the body and mind. Stand in the upright position with the feet together, the eyes closed and the arms at the sides. The weight of the body should be evenly distributed on both feet. Observe any spontaneous movement of the body as it relaxes. Gradually become more aware of the natural flow of the breath with each inhalation and exhalation. Then include awareness of the movement in the body with the rhythm of the breath. Retain this awareness for a few moments. Slowly withdraw the awareness from the breath and become aware of *bhrumadhya*, the space between the eyebrows. Within this space, visualize the full moon in a clear night sky, shining brightly upon the waves of the ocean. The full reflection of the moon penetrates the deep waters and the cool shade of moonlight catches the tops of the waves as they dance. See the image clearly and develop awareness of any feelings or sensations that are created in the mind and body. Slowly let the visualization fade and again become aware of the whole body in the standing position.



5

Intermediate Asanas

BACKWARD BENDING ASANAS

How do backward bending asanas keep the spine and back healthy?

Swami Satyananda: On a physical level, the backward bending asanas stretch the abdominal muscles and tone and strengthen the muscles controlling the spine. The spinal nerves, which emerge from between the adjoining vertebrae, are decompressed. This has beneficial repercussions throughout the body since these nerves give energy to all the other nerves, organs and muscles in the body.

The spinal column is a 'stacked pile' of vertebrae and discs. Groups of muscles extend all along it, covering and supporting it from all sides. Maintenance of the spine in a straight and aligned position, despite all movement, depends totally on the balanced, supportive contraction and tone of the muscles. The muscles themselves are controlled unconsciously through posture.

Subconscious tensions and 'hang-ups' are often reflected in the tonic activity of the back muscles, resulting in too hard or too lax zones instead of homogeneous consistency. Research has shown that ninety percent of backache has its origin in muscular imbalance. If these imbalances are prolonged, the 'stack pile' of the vertebral column is

disaligned, the ligaments are strained and symptoms of spondylitis, slipped disc, sciatica and osteoarthritis begin to manifest.

The practise of a balanced regime of backward and forward bending asanas can correct postural defects and neuro-muscular imbalances of the vertebral column. As with all asanas, it is important to perform these practices with proper control and synchronization of the breath so that the whole group of muscles is uniformly contracted. Impure blood often accumulates in the back region where circulation tends to be sluggish due to continuous maintenance of an upright position. These asanas help to circulate, purify and enrich the blood in this region.

Backward bending asanas create a negative pressure in the abdomen and pelvis, helping neuro-circulatory toning of all the related organs. They also massage the abdomen and pelvic organs by stretching the muscles in this area, especially the rectus abdominis.

However, people with excessive lower back curve (lumbar lordosis) should not practise backward bending asanas, apart from *saral bhujangasana*, easy cobra pose, *ardha shalabhasana*, half locust pose, and *gomukhasana*, cow's face pose.

Which backward bends should be practised for complete spinal health?

Swami Satyananda: Three of the backward bending asanas, *bhujangasana*, cobra pose, *shalabhasana*, locust pose, and *dhanurasana*, bow pose, traditionally form a set. If practised consecutively during regular asana sessions, these asanas contribute much to ensuring or promoting a healthy body. They influence all the main systems of the body: nervous, glandular, circulatory, respiratory, digestive and alimentary, and so may be regarded as almost a necessity in establishing or maintaining general health.

The importance of a supple spine cannot be over emphasized. Besides providing the support framework for the trunk and head, it also provides protection to the large

number of nerves that are distributed to all parts of the body. The triple set of asanas, bhujangasana, shalabhasana and dhanurasana, influence the whole spine, rendering it supple, stimulating the associated nerves and providing a good blood supply to them. Generally it can be said that: bhujangasana affects the spine in the upper back and neck; shalabhasana affects the lower parts of the spine; and dhanurasana affects the entire spine from top to bottom.

The spine will attain optimum condition if these three backward bending poses (or their equivalents) are counterposed by each of the following asanas: *paschimottanasana*, back stretching pose, *padahastasana*, hand to foot pose, or similar, which bend the spine forwards mainly in the lower region of the trunk; *halasana*, plough pose, which bends the spine forwards chiefly in the upper region of the trunk and neck; and *matsyendrasana*, fish pose, which applies torsion to the spine.

How do bhujangasana, shalabhasana and dhanurasana complement each other?

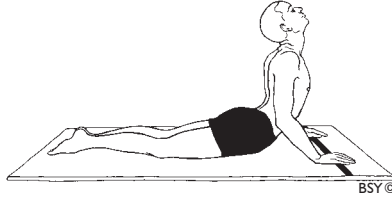
Swami Satyananda: Dhanurasana roughly duplicates the benefits of bhujangasana and shalabhasana. However, there are notable differences. In shalabhasana, the back muscles are tensed, while in dhanurasana they are passive. In bhujangasana, the back muscles should also be relaxed, but the main influence is on the small of the back in the region of the sacrum. In dhanurasana, the main influence is the intense intra-abdominal pressure. Each of these asanas has its place in an asana program. They complement each other. It is for this reason that they should be done one after the other.

Why do backward bending asanas have an extroverting effect?

Swami Satyananda: Backward bending asanas are postures which turn the body out to face the world. They are stimulating and extroverting. As they expand the chest and encourage inhalation, they are associated with the attitude

of embracing life. They are dynamic postures which move counter to gravity, requiring strength and energy to perform.

BHUJANGASANA: COBRA POSE



What is the meaning of bhujangasana?

Swami Satyananda: In Sanskrit *bhujanga* means cobra or serpent. The usual English translation is 'cobra pose'. This asana is so-called as in the final position it resembles a cobra, the raised trunk, neck and head representing the hood.

What are the effects of bhujangasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Bhujangasana expands the chest, which improves and deepens breathing. It can help remove backache and keep the spine supple and healthy. A stiff spine interferes with all the nervous impulses sent from the brain to the body and vice versa. By arching the spine, improving circulation in the back region and toning the nerves, better communication between the brain and body results. People suffering from slipped disc or sciatica can also benefit from this asana, but care should be taken.

This asana tones the ovaries and uterus and helps alleviate menstrual and other gynaecological disorders. It stimulates the appetite, alleviates constipation and is beneficial for all the abdominal organs, especially the liver and kidneys. The adrenal glands, situated on top of the kidneys, are also massaged and stimulated to work more efficiently. The secretion of cortisone is maintained and the thyroid gland is regulated.

Bhujangasana and its effects are described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:42–43):

*Angushthanaabhiparyantamadhobhoomau cha vinyaset;
Dharaam karatalaabhyaam dhritvordhrvasheersham phaneeva hi.*

*Dehaagnirvarddhate nityam sarvarogavinaashanam;
Jaagarti bhujangeevee bhujangaanasaaadhanaat.*

Keep the body, from the toes to the navel, on the floor and placing the palms of the hands also firmly on the floor, raise the head like a snake. This is called bhujangasana. The fire of the body increases, all diseases are destroyed and kundalini shakti is awakened by the practice of bhujangasana.

Sarvaroga vinaashanam, all types of diseases are eradicated by practising this asana. Research has shown that bhujangasana strengthens the nervous system. All the nerves from the brain to the toes are energized, and coordination and balance are established inside the body.

On a pranic level, bhujangasana has a strong effect on all the organs related to swadhisthana, manipura, anahata and vishuddhi chakras. *Bhujangini Devi*, or *kundalini shakti*, the evolutionary energy within, is also awakened by this practice.

Why is bhujangasana recommended for women?

Swami Sivananda: Bhujangasana is particularly useful for ladies in toning their ovaries and uterus. It is a powerful tonic. It relieves amenorrhoea (absence of menstruation), dysmenorrhea (painful or difficult menstruation) and various other utero-ovarian diseases. Bhujangasana maintains efficient blood circulation to those parts. For ladies who practise bhujangasana, deliveries will be normal and easy.

SHALABHASANA: LOCUST POSE

What is the meaning of shalabhasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Since the body assumes the shape of a *shalabh*, a locust, while doing the practice, it is called

shalabhasana, the locust pose. Shalabhasana is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:39):

*Adhyaasya shete karayugmavaksha aalambya bhoomim
karayostalaabhyaam;*

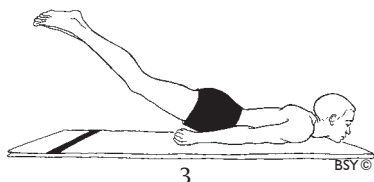
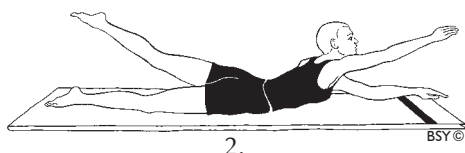
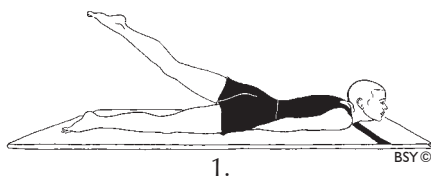
*Paadau cha shoonye cha vitasti chordhyam vadanti peetham
shalabham munindraa.*

Lie flat with the face towards the ground. Both arms are placed by the sides of the chest. The palms should be placed firmly on the ground. The legs are raised in this position. Munis have called it shalabhasana.

What are the physical effects of shalabhasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Shalabhasana strengthens the lower back and pelvic organs, and tones the sciatic nerves, providing relief from backache, mild sciatica and slipped disc as long as the condition is not serious. It tones and balances the functioning of the liver, stomach, bowels and other abdominal organs, and stimulates the appetite. The parasympathetic nerves are particularly prominent in the region of the neck and pelvis. Shalabhasana stimulates the whole autonomic nervous system, especially the parasympathetic outflow.

1. Ardha Shalabhasana (half locust pose)
2. Ardha Shalabhasana (half locust pose) Variation
3. Shalabhasana (locust pose)



How does shalabasana affect the internal organs?

Swami Satyananda: The massage to the abdominal organs is accentuated by the deep inhalation and retention of breath. Furthermore the pressure in the abdomen due to the weight of the body is transmitted to the lungs and heart via the diaphragm, improving the functioning of both these vital organs.

DHANURASANA: BOW POSE

How is dhanurasana described in traditional hatha yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Dhanurasana is recommended in both *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* and in *Gheranda Samhita*. More detail is given in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:19):

*Prasaarya paadau bhuvi dandaroopau karau cha prishthe
dhritapaadayugmam;*

*Kritvaa dhanurvatparivartitaangam nigadyate vai dhanura-
asanam tat.*

Stretch both legs straight on the floor like sticks. Taking both hands towards the back, catch hold of both feet and let the body acquire the shape of a bow. According to yogis this is dhanurasana.

How can the practice of dhanurasana be developed?

Swami Satyananda: Just as there are different stages of drawing a bow, there is a progression for the various techniques of *dhanurasana*, the bow pose. Dhanurasana is described in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:25):

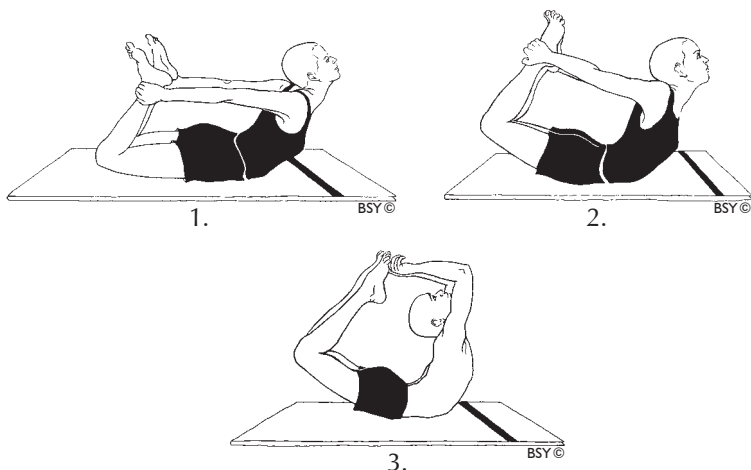
*Paadaangushthau tu paanibhyaam griheetvaa shravanaavadhi.
Dhanuraakarshanam kuryaaddhanuraasanamuchyate.*

Holding the toes with the hands, pull them up to the ears as if drawing a bow. This is called dhanurasana.

There are three stages for the practice of dhanurasana: *saral dhanurasana*, easy bow pose, *dhanurasana*, bow pose and

poorna dhanurasana, full bow pose. The final position of each stage can be held either with normal breathing or internal breath retention. The body can also be gently rocked forward and backward. Concentration should be on vishuddhi chakra in the back of the neck, or on manipura in the abdominal region, or on the midpoint where the back is bending.

1. Saral Dhanurasana (easy bow pose)
2. Dhanurasana (bow pose)
3. Poorna Dhanurasana (full bow pose)



What is the correct way to practise dhanurasana?

Swami Satyananda: Dhanurasana is often done incorrectly. Care should be taken to avoid the following mistakes:

- Tensing the back in order to raise the body into the final pose. Only use the leg muscles and let the back be passively bent backwards. This is a little difficult for many people, but with practice it will become easier.
- Holding the feet instead of the ankles. Make sure that your hands wrap around the region of the ankles, not the feet.
- Separating the feet. Keep the feet together so that the big toes remain in contact throughout the entire practice.

Beginners find it easier to keep the knees apart. One option is to try bringing them closer together while in the final pose. This will intensify the effect of the asana.

- Resting the weight of the body on the ribs instead of the soft part of the abdomen in the final pose. Adjust the balance of the body so that the belly lies in contact with the floor. This is easily done by adjusting the height of the head, and by either tensing or relaxing the leg muscles, accordingly.
- Bending the arms. Keep the arms straight throughout the entire practice.

What are the health benefits of dhanurasana?

Swami Satyananda: Dhanurasana is useful for overcoming lethargy and sluggishness in mind and body. It has a direct effect on the solar plexus at the navel, which is a large sympathetic nervous centre vitally important for healthy functioning of the organs of the body. These nerves are brought into maximum efficiency, improving the functioning of the whole body, especially the digestive, eliminative and reproductive organs.

Dhanurasana decongests the entire abdominal region and its organs. The liver, the multi-duty organ of digestion is massaged, resulting in improved digestion. The pancreas is toned, making it useful for yogic management of diabetes. The kidneys are stimulated and the whole alimentary canal is toned.

By lying on the diaphragm with the arms stretched back, the heart is given a gentle massage and as the chest is fully expanded, dhanurasana is useful in the treatment of various chest ailments. For example, it is suitable for removing the hunching tendency of asthmatics, which aggravates ill health. Dhanurasana realigns the back and thereby improves the breathing processes. This in turn leads to free flow of air through the nasal passages.

Blood is encouraged to flush through the whole system, having a cleansing effect. The kidneys are rendered more

efficient, leading to improved fluid balance within the body. Dhanurasana also helps alleviate constipation, dyspepsia and excess fat.

The spinal column is realigned and rejuvenated. The ligaments, muscles and nerves are given a good stretch, especially on the front (anterior) surface. This relieves stiffness and the spine is made more supple and healthy. The deep muscles of the back are exercised, causing stagnant blood to recirculate.

Various endocrinal glands are massaged and toned, notably the thyroid and the adrenals. The secretions of the adrenals are regularized. Blood is flushed through the glands. It is this effect that quickly removes tiredness, as cortisone is secreted to help with the required lift. Conversely, if the glands are overactive, the secretion of cortisone is reduced so that the body attains balance. This also helps to alleviate various types of rheumatism. Dhanurasana helps to regulate the menstrual cycle and also to correct female infertility, if the cause is not due to deformity of the reproductive organs themselves.

What are the effects of dhanurasana on the spine?

Swami Niranjanananda: The spinal column is realigned and the ligaments, muscles and nerves are activated, removing stiffness. Dhanurasana helps to correct hunching in the upper back. Easier variations are prescribed especially for the treatment of spinal disorders, such as slipped disc, spondylitis or sciatica.

What is the purpose of rocking the body whilst in dhanurasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: While in the position of dhanurasana, the body can be rocked to and fro on the abdomen. This asana reconditions the entire alimentary canal. When the body is rocked forward and backward, the liver, abdominal organs and muscles are massaged. The pancreas and adrenal glands are toned and their secretions balanced. The

kidneys are massaged and excess weight is reduced around the abdominal area. This leads to improved functioning of the digestive, excretory and reproductive organs and helps to remove gastrointestinal disorders, dyspepsia, chronic constipation and sluggishness of the liver.

How does dhanurasana affect the manipura region?

Swami Niranjanananda: This is a powerful practice for the awakening of manipura chakra at the psychic level. Physically it revitalizes the solar plexus and activates the sympathetic nervous system, which temporarily raises the blood pressure and increases the circulation of blood and prana throughout the system.

One of the main characteristics of this posture is to press the whole body weight down onto the digestive system, around the diaphragm, opening up that area. It has a powerful effect on the liver and abdominal organs. The whole front of the body is stretched to the extreme, having effects all the way from the head and neck, down through the chest and abdomen, into the pelvis. The main effect, however, takes place around the diaphragm.

How is the body moved while in dhanurasana?

Swami Sivananda: In dhanurasana the whole body rests on the abdomen; this asana gives a good massage to the abdominal region. The stomach must be empty. While holding the pose, move the bow-shaped body from side to side and forwards and backwards. This ensures a thorough massage to the abdomen. Swing, rock and rejoice. Mentally repeat *Om, Om, Om*.

GOMUKHASANA: COW'S FACE POSE

How can gomukhasana be used as a meditation posture?

Swami Niranjanananda: The hatha yoga version of gomukhasana differs from the upanishadic variation in which the upper portion of the technique is not included. It

is impossible to remain in this posture with the hands behind the back for half an hour or an hour. Therefore, the upanishadic version simply maintains the leg posture with the hands on top of the knees, keeping the spine straight. This variation is also described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:17):

*Paadau cha bhoomau samsthaapya prishthapaarshve niveshayet;
Sthiram kaayam samaasaadya gomukham gomukhaakritih.*

Placing both feet on the ground beside the buttocks, sitting upright with the body steady is gomukhasana, which resembles the face of a cow.

The practice of gomukhasana is conducive to structural stability and balance. From an anatomical point of view, the legs and hips are not rotated externally as they are in the normal meditative postures, but the knees are brought to the centre instead of out to the sides. This affects the pelvic structure and stretches the outer side of the thigh, rather than the inside.

Concentration is fixed on ajna chakra at the psychic level, or on respiration at the physical level.

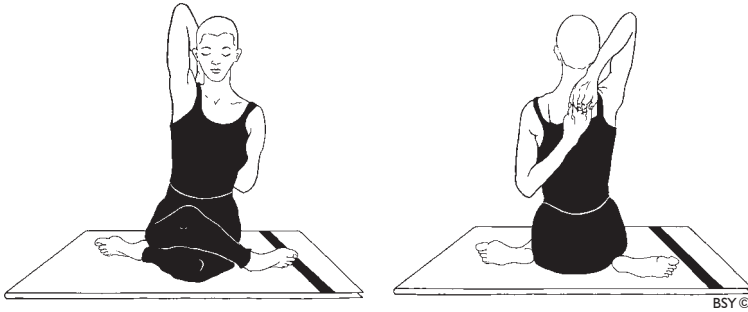
Should the eyes be open or closed in gomukhasana?

Swami Satyananda: In gomukhasana the eyes may be open or closed, or shambhavi mudra may be performed, which will give the mind a point of concentration. Alternatively, nasikagra drishti may be performed.

What effect does gomukhasana have on the pranamaya kosha?

Swami Satyananda: In gomukhasana the nadis in the legs are squeezed and the nadis connected with the reproductive organs and glands are influenced, thus regulating the hormonal secretions. Gomukhasana strongly affects the vajra nadi, preventing prana from flowing outward. Instead, prana is directed to and accumulated in mooladhara chakra.

The interlinking of the fingers prevents prana from escaping through the hands. Gomukhasana creates a complete energy circuit flowing in the spinal region. The arm position is significant as the arms form the shape of the figure eight, or infinity. This represents the complete balance of prana between the higher and lower forces, and the positive and negative aspects.



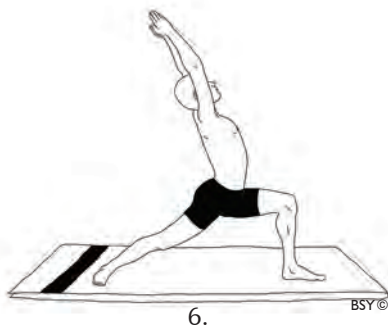
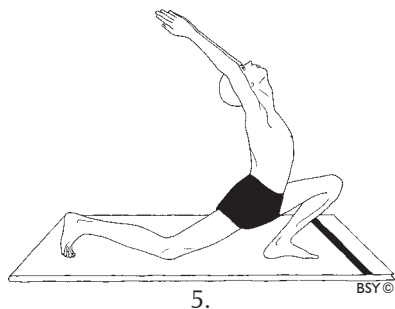
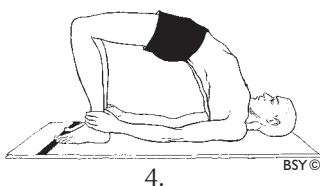
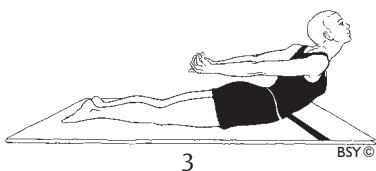
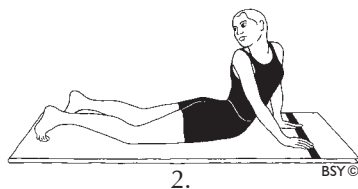
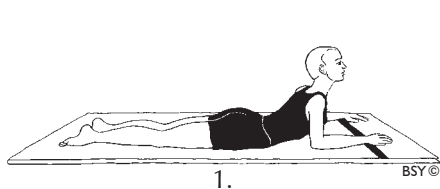
What influence does gomukhasana have on the respiratory system?

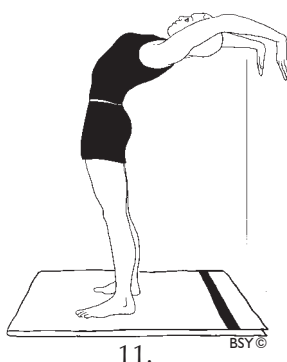
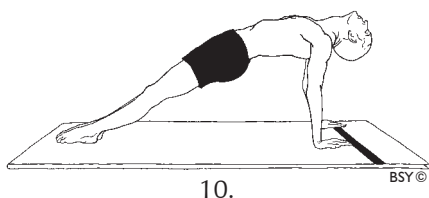
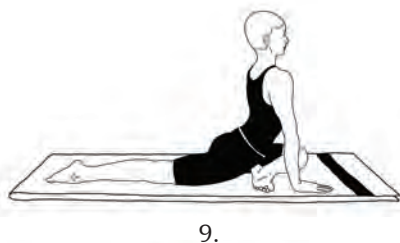
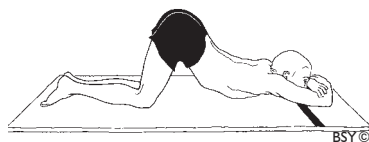
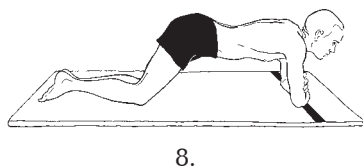
Swami Niranjanananda: The base position of gomukhasana locks the hips and pelvis, creating a firm base for stretching the sides of the trunk and opening up the chest. It is important to remember that during the practice, the breathing process should take place from the abdomen, not from the chest. While inhaling, the abdomen is expanded; while exhaling, the abdomen is contracted.

Gomukasana opens up the chest area, expanding the lungs and increasing the breathing capacity. Thus it is beneficial in the treatment of asthma and other respiratory diseases. Due to the opening up of the pectoral muscles at the front of the chest, gomukhasana unlocks much of the tension that is acquired from the stooped posture of day to day sedentary living. A lot of tension accumulates in the shoulders; this powerful stretch breaks any shoulder tension, while opening up and improving lung function.

ADDITIONAL BACKWARD BENDING ASANAS

1. Saral Bhujangasana (easy cobra pose)
2. Tiryak Bhujangasana (twisting cobra pose)
3. Sarpasana (snake pose)
4. Kandharasana (shoulder pose)
5. Ardha Chandrasana (half-moon pose)
6. Utthita Ardha Chandrasana (raised half-moon pose)
7. Vamadevasana (pose of Sage Vamadeva)
8. Utthan Pristhasana (lizard pose) Sequence
9. Kapot namanasana (bowing dove pose) Sequence
10. Setu Asana (bridge pose)
11. Ardha Chakrasana (half wheel pose)





FORWARD BENDING ASANAS

How do forward bending asanas create a relaxed, internalized state?

Swami Satyananda: Generally speaking, forward bending is a passive process in which gravity is used to stretch the muscle groups being focused on. While backward bends move the body away from the confines of gravity, forward bending asanas use gravity to help release tension and pain. It is a process of introversion, counteracting the extroversion and dynamic opening effect of bending backwards. Forward

bending, associated with chest compression and exhalation, induces relaxation.

Why do many people find forward bending asanas difficult?

Swami Satyananda: Most people find forward bending asanas reasonably difficult as their backs have lost their flexibility through lack of exercise. This flexibility is most important, for it keeps the spinal column and associated nerves in the best possible condition. A flexible spine is often a clear indicator of good health, while a rigid spine often signifies poor health. This is illustrated in the case of children, who generally radiate abundant energy and good health, and who find forward bending asanas simple. Of course, there are many other reasons for their wonderful health, but a supple spine is a contributing factor.

If a person takes sufficient exercise, the spine will automatically remain flexible. The problem of stiffness and rigidity of the spine only arises with sedentary life, where people don't use their bodies enough. Modern man must find other methods of maintaining health and exercising his body. One method is to do asanas, including forward bending poses, on a regular basis.

What is the effect of forward bending asanas on the physical body?

Swami Satyananda: Forward bending asanas move the spine into the position known as the primary curve, the shape it takes in the womb. During a forward bending asana each of the vertebra is separated, stimulating the nerves, improving circulation around the spine and nourishing the spinal cord. This has a positive impact on the organs of the body generally and on the brain specifically. This group of asanas is also important for making the back muscles supple and strong, compressing and massaging the abdominal organs, including the liver, kidneys, pancreas and intestines, and stretching the leg muscles and tendons.

The blood flow in the spinal region has a tendency to be sluggish. Forward bending poses squeeze this stagnant or semi-stagnant blood from the spinal areas, particularly the pelvis and lower back, returning the blood for recirculation and purification. On terminating the asana, an increased volume of enriched blood flows into the back muscles, the spinal cord, the nerve ganglia and sympathetic nerves that surround the spine, and the parts of the parasympathetic system that emerge from the spine in the pelvic region. The overall result is the effective removal of waste matter and toxins and an enhanced supply of nourishment to the muscles and nerves. This in turn encourages a more efficient functioning of these extensive parts of the body. The spinal nerves have connections with most of the organs, so their improved functioning has beneficial repercussions in many seemingly unrelated regions and organs of the body. In this way, many organic malfunctions can be rectified as the organs regain their lost vitality.

Besides the improved blood supply, the nervous system in and around the spine is generally stretched during the forward bending poses. This tends to invigorate the whole system, together with the organs and parts of the body that they innervate.

Most forward bending asanas start by bending from the hips and not the waist. Bending from the hips gives greater flexibility of movement and creates stronger pressure against the abdomen. Care must be taken not to force the back to bend further forward than present flexibility allows; rather, the muscles should be relaxed, allowing gravity and exhalation to move the body. With regular practice, even the most rigid back develops increased flexibility.

People with any kind of back condition and those suffering from backache should consult a doctor before practising these asanas. The specific contra-indications for each practice should be carefully observed.

What is the effect of forward bending asanas on the abdominal organs?

Swami Satyananda: These asanas increase the intra-abdominal pressure in a threefold manner:

1. By application of the thighs or heels against the front wall of the abdomen. This, of course, is only possible in those who can bend sufficiently far forwards.
2. By general contraction of the abdominal muscles, particularly the rectus abdominis, brought about by flexion in the abdominal region and, if the asanas are performed correctly, by voluntary contraction of the abdominal muscles during exhalation.
3. By deep abdominal breathing, which the practitioner is advised to do during the asanas. To facilitate the increased volume of air in the lungs, the diaphragm moves downwards and squeezes the abdominal organs. Normally the front wall of the abdomen simultaneously moves outwards; however, during forward bending poses, this outward movement is restricted by the position of the thighs on the abdominal wall. The result is that the pressure inside the abdomen increases. Again, this is only effective with people who can bend sufficiently far forwards so that the thighs press the abdomen.

The increased intra-abdominal pressure gives a profound massage to the internal organs and removes impure, sluggish blood. The overall result is an improvement in the tone of the organs by this enhanced blood circulation and a consequent removal of toxins. Supplementing these influences is the stimulation of the nerves which control the functioning of the abdominal organs. This further helps ensure the optimum operation of these organs.

How do forward bending asanas help relieve constipation?

Swami Satyananda: The forward bending poses are a boon to people who suffer from constipation, since by increasing the intra-abdominal pressure they physically stimulate the action of intestinal peristalsis. This is a series of wave-like motions

in the intestines that encourage the faecal matter to move smoothly towards the anus for defecation.

Though constipation has many root causes such as lack of exercise, excessive anxiety and inadequate intake of water, the forward bending asanas attack the problem from various directions. The peristaltic action is stimulated, not only by the increased pressure in the abdomen, but also by the stimulation of the involuntary nerves in and surrounding the spine which control this function. Forward bending poses, as with other asanas, also bring about a general feeling of tranquillity, which in no small way contributes to the removal of constipation.

How do forward bending asanas assist digestion?

Swami Satyananda: The digestive organs, especially the intestines and liver, require a good flow of blood to ensure that the nourishment from the food is absorbed by the blood and distributed to all parts of the body. Both these organs are especially liable to blood congestion and the forward bending poses help remove this condition.

Auxiliary organs associated with the digestive process are also beneficially influenced. The pancreas, for example, which provides various digestive juices, is encouraged to secrete sufficient amounts to ensure the optimum breakdown of food into a manageable condition for absorption into the blood flowing to the intestines. The secretion of digestive juices is controlled by a balance between the operation of the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems. This is also beneficially influenced. Thus these poses act on the nerves and the pancreas, assisting production of the correct amounts of digestive juice, and helping to eliminate indigestion.

The gastric juice supply to the stomach is stimulated by the vagus nerve originating in the brain and by hormones secreted from glands in the lower part of the stomach, the pyloric end. Forward bending poses regulate to a greater or lesser degree the hormonal secretion and so in turn the gastric juice production is balanced.

Further, forward bending poses have a particular influence on the liver. One of the many functions of the liver is the production of bile, which is essential for the digestion of fats. These asanas help to ensure that sufficient bile is produced, enhancing the digestive process.

What is the effect of forward bending asanas on the production of insulin?

Swami Satyananda: Insulin, the hormone which regulates the level of blood sugar in the body, is secreted by the islets of Langerhans in the pancreas. This function is affected by forward bending asanas. Diabetics have improved their condition by the regular practice of forward bending poses.

What is the effect of forward bending asanas on the kidneys?

Swami Satyananda: The kidneys are influenced by these asanas. Therefore, these organs associated with the purification of the blood, and the excretion of urine, are encouraged to function efficiently.

What is the effect of forward bending asanas on the pelvic organs?

Swami Satyananda: In essentially the same way as the abdominal organs, the pelvic organs also benefit by the blood decongestion that takes place during forward bending asanas, the enriched blood supply after completion, together with stimulation of the associated nerves, notably the parasympathetic emerging from the lower region of the spine. In this way, all the organs of the pelvis are encouraged to function normally and many ailments of these organs are relieved. The influence of the asanas is notable in the prostate glands and the gonads.

What are the effects of forward bending on the legs?

Swami Satyananda: The legs receive an especially good stretch during forward bending poses, particularly if

the asanas are done correctly whereby the legs are kept completely straight. The hamstring muscles in the back of the legs are often permanently contracted through inadequate usage. The forward bending poses stretch and tone these muscles and allow them to relax easily after termination of the asana. The articulation of the hip joints is also notably loosened.

What is the effect of forward bending asanas on height and obesity?

Swami Satyananda: The powerful extension of the spine during forward bending poses can encourage a permanent, though possibly slight, increase in the practitioner's height, if practised regularly. Quite an appreciable height increase is possible, however, if the structure of the spine is deformed in any way. Forward bending asanas can help to remove these deformities, increasing the person's height.

Obese people experience more difficulty than others in performing the forward bending poses to any degree of proficiency. However, they should persevere no matter how little they can bend their body forwards as these asanas are extremely effective in removing fat, particularly in the abdominal region.

Additionally, by strengthening the abdominal muscles and especially the rectus abdominis muscles, a sagging and protruding abdomen, including the internal organs, is encouraged to return to its normal shape.

The dynamic form of pada hastasana is especially recommended for removing obesity and protrusion of the abdomen.

What is the psychological effect of forward bending asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Medical science attaches great importance to the solar plexus in the abdominal cavity near the suprarenal glands, and defines it as part of the large network of sympathetic nerve ganglia and fibres.

Yogically this region is regarded as a centre of pranic energy, or vital energy that pervades the entire cosmos, which supplies the whole body with vitality and strength. Notably, this nerve plexus is connected to the suprarenal medulla, which secretes the hormone adrenalin. This hormone, often referred to as the 'fight or flight hormone', prepares the body for emergencies. During periods of fear, anxiety, stress, or any threatening situation, the body automatically becomes functionally more efficient. This is attained by bodily changes brought about immediately by the stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system, via the central nervous system. This is followed by the secretion of adrenalin into the bloodstream which exactly duplicates the effects of the stimulation of the sympathetic nervous system. This mobilizes all the resources of the body to help face any emergency condition.

It can be generally stated that chronic overactivity of the adrenal glands (in secreting adrenalin) or the nervous centres of the solar plexus is associated with mental states of anxiety and stress. During forward bending poses these functions are relaxed and normalized, so that mental states of relative tranquillity and calmness can be produced. People who are prone to psychological tension will find these asanas invaluable.

Conversely, underactivity of these functions can be associated with lethargy and lack of energy. By normalizing their activity, forward bending poses can bring about increased vitality in the practitioner.

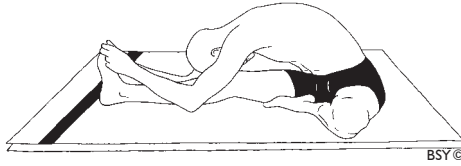
How can forward bends help transform the personality?

Swami Satyananda: Many people lead sedentary lifestyles with little or no exercise, and as a result the body becomes stiff and unable to bend forward. City living encourages mental tension and physical rigidity, both of which are counteracted by forward bending asanas.

At another level, forward bending is associated with bowing and humility. An inability to bend forward may

indicate a stiff, proud or stubborn personality. Difficulty bending forward is also associated with fear. Human beings face forward to see the world, but some people live in constant fear of attack from behind, and the backs of their bodies unconsciously freeze. Forward bending asanas release this rigidity. Forward bending asanas loosen up the back, maintaining good health and increasing vitality.

JANU SIRSHASANA: HEAD TO KNEE POSE



What are the benefits of janu sirshasana?

Swami Sivananda: Janu sirshasana increases the digestive fire. It stimulates the solar plexus and helps one maintain celibacy. Urinary troubles are cured. It is useful for intestinal colic. The legs are strengthened.

Kundalini is awakened. Laziness and weakness vanish. All other benefits mentioned in paschimottanasana can be derived from this asana. Those who practise janu sirshasana will find it easy to practise paschimottanasana.

How should the mind be directed during janu sirshasana?

Swami Sivananda: When practising janu sirshasana, draw the muscles of the anus upwards. Feel that the seminal energy is flowing upwards towards the brain as *ojas shakti*, spiritual energy. Use the *bhavana shakti*, the feeling energy of the mind.

PASCHIMOTTANASANA: BACK STRETCHING POSE

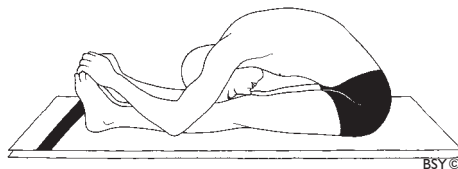
What is the meaning and significance of paschimottanasana?

Swami Satyananda: In Sanskrit *paschima* means back or posterior and *uttan* means stretching. The normal

English translation of this name is given as the ‘back stretching pose’. Paschimottanasana is also known as: ugrasana, *ugra* meaning formidable, fierce, powerful; brahmacharyasana, *brahmacharya* meaning self-restraint and celibacy; and paschimatana, which has the same meaning as paschimottanasana.

There are also various esoteric meanings of the name. In tantra, the ancient teachings akin to yoga, the word *tan* in ‘uttan’ means to stretch. Uttan in this context is generally interpreted not to mean physical stretching, but stretching or expansion of consciousness. Thus, paschimottanasana can mean, ‘the asana which causes expansion of consciousness and the unleashing of spiritual forces which travel up the sushumna’.

The same meaning can be derived from a different translation of the Sanskrit word *paschima*, which not only means back, but also west. Ancient Indian tradition refers to the whole back as the western, the front of the body as the eastern, the top of the head as the northern and the soles of the feet as the southern aspects of the body. This is in a physical sense. In a spiritual sense the western aspect can mean the subtle nerve channel in the back, sushumna. Thus in a physical sense the name of the asana can be interpreted to mean ‘the stretching of the western aspect or back’ and in a spiritual sense ‘the asana that causes the ascension of spiritual forces in the west or sushumna’. Spiritually, this ascending force is most important, since it connects or unites with the *sahasrara chakra*, the centre of consciousness in the brain. This effect is described in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:28–29):



Prasaarya paadau bhuvi dandaropau dorbhyaam padaagradvitayam griheetvaa.

Jaanooparinystalalaatadesho vasedidam pashchimataanamaahuh.

Iti pashchimataanamaasanagryam pavanam pashchimavaahinam karoti.

Udayam jatharaanalasya kuryaadudare kaarshyamarogataam cha punsaam.

Stretching the legs (in front) on the ground, like a stick; bending forward, holding the toes with both hands and placing the forehead on the knees, is called paschimottanasana. (28)

Paschimottanasana is the best amongst asanas. By this asana the pranic currents rise through sushumna, the digestive fire increases, the abdomen becomes flat, and the practitioner becomes free from diseases. (29)

How is paschimottanasana described in the classical hatha yoga texts?

Swami Satyananda: The ancient sages had a high regard for this asana. Paschimottanasana is described in books such as *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, *Gheranda Samhita* and *Shiva Samhita*. *Shiva Samhita* (3:92–94) is specific in its praise:

Prasaarya charanadvandvam parasparamasamyutam.

Svapaanibhyaam dridham dhritvaa jaanoopari shiro nyaset.

Aasanogramidam proktam bhavedaniladeepanam.

Dehaavasaanaharanam pashchimottaanasamjnakam.

Ya etadaasanam shreshtham pratyaham saadhayetsudheeh.

Vaayuh pashchimamaargena tasya sancharati dhruvam.

Etadabhyaasasheelaanaam sarvasiddhih prajaayate.

Tasmaadyogee prayatnena saadhayetsiddhimaatmanah.

Gopaneeyam prayatnena na deyam yasya kasyachit.

Yena sheeghram marutsiddhirbhaved dukkhaughanaashinee.

Stretch out both the legs and keep them apart; firmly take hold of the head by the hands, and place them

on the knees. This is called ugrasana, it excites the motion of the air, destroys the dullness and uneasiness of the body, and is also called paschimottanasana. That wise man who daily practises this noble posture can certainly induce the flow of the prana in the back of the body. (92)

Those who practise this obtain all the siddhis; therefore, those desirous of attaining powers should practise this diligently. (93)

This should be kept secret with greatest care, and not be given to anybody and everybody. Through it pranic energy is induced to flow through the back in the sushumna, and a multitude of miseries are destroyed. (94)

In the *Gheranda Samhita* (2:27) description, the toes are grasped:

*Prasaarya paadau bhuvi dandaroopau vinyastabhaalam
chitiyugmamadhye;
Yatnena paadau cha dhritau karaabhyaam tatpashchimottaan-
amihaasanam syaat.*

Stretch both legs out, like a staff, on the ground in a natural way and grasp the big toes. Then place the head between the knees. Thus it becomes paschimottanasana.

What are the health benefits of paschimottanasana?

Swami Sivananda: This is an excellent asana. Books on hatha yoga speak highly of this asana.

It makes the breath flow through the sushumna and rouses the gastric fire. It reduces fat in the abdomen. It is specifically recommended for corpulence or obesity and for the enlargement of spleen and liver. Sarvangasana is for the stimulation of the endocrine glands and paschimottanasana is for the stimulation of the abdominal viscera, such as kidneys,

liver, pancreas etc. It increases peristalsis of the bowels. This asana relieves constipation, removes sluggishness of the liver, dyspepsia, belching and gastritis.

Lumbago or stiff back and all sorts of myalgia and other diseases of the back muscles are cured. The hip, the muscles of the abdomen, the solar plexus of nerves, the epigastric plexus of nerves, bladder, prostate, lumbar nerves and sympathetic cord are all toned and kept in a healthy, sound condition.

Thanks to paschimottanasana, and to the rishis who first introduced these wonderful asanas to the students of hatha yoga!

Why is paschimottanasana recommended before practising meditation?

Swami Satyananda: Practising paschimottanasana immediately before meditation practice is strongly recommended. This especially applies when one wants to practise meditation without doing other yogic practices, perhaps due to lack of time. Paschimottanasana is a wonderful preparatory technique for meditation, as it quickly loosens up the body, removing stiffness and inducing high states of relaxation and wakefulness.

How can the spiritual benefits of paschimottanasana be gained?

Swami Satyananda: To obtain spiritual benefits the asana must be performed for extended lengths of time. The duration is entirely up to the discretion of the individual and there is no limit. Paschimottanasana acts particularly to decongest the subtle pranic channels of the spine, allowing prana to flow without obstruction. This vital energy is allowed to pervade the whole body, producing vitality and ease in directing spiritual energy, *kundalini*, to the sahasrara chakra.

For spiritual benefits the concentration should be on swadhisthana chakra or manipura chakra. During the movement from the starting position to the final pose, the concentration should be directed to ensuring synchronization

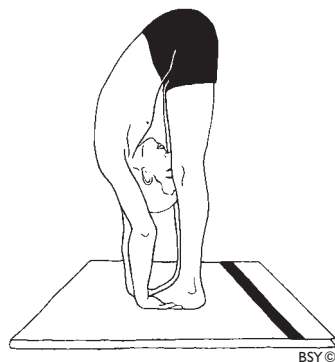
between the breath and the physical movement and also on ensuring maximum relaxation of the muscles.

Paschimottanasana also assists in maintaining celibacy by helping to sublimate sexual energy towards spiritual directions.

PADAHASTASANA: HAND TO FOOT POSE

What are the benefits of padahastasana?

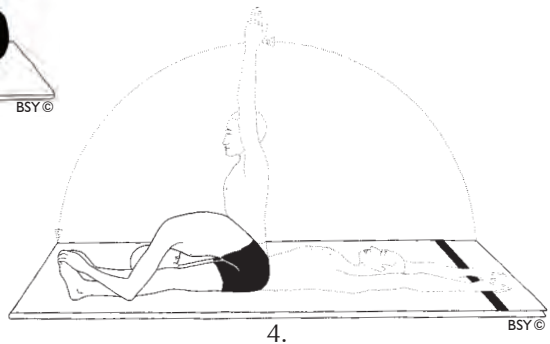
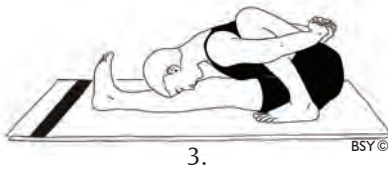
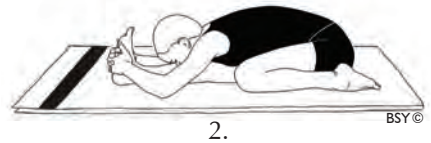
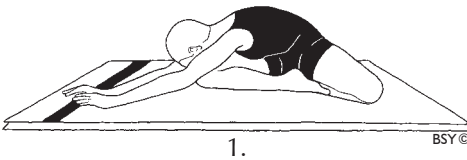
Swami Sivananda: There are manifold benefits of padahastasana. One feels invigorated when the practice is over. The body is rendered light as much *taamas* is dispelled. Adiposity disappears. Any shortening of the legs owing to fracture of the leg or thigh bones is rectified. There will be a slight lengthening of the leg by practising this for about three months and by rubbing the thighs with mustard oil to which a little salt is added. Salt increases penetration of the oil. This asana helps free the passage of *apana prana* downwards. The *sushumna nadi* is purified and strengthened. The benefits of *paschimottanasana* are derived from this asana. It can be called 'standing *paschimottanasana*' as the technique is the same.

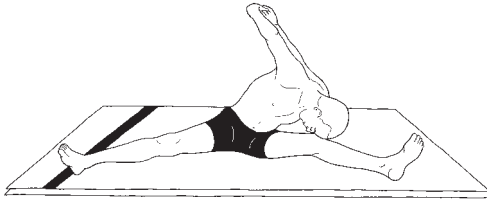


ADDITIONAL FORWARD BENDING ASANAS

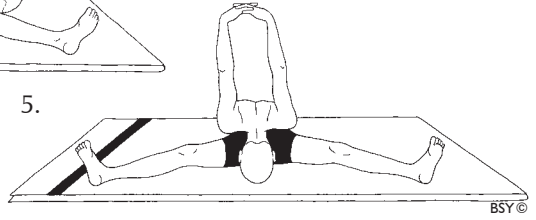
1. Saithalyasana (animal relaxation pose)
2. Eka Pada Paschimottanasana (one leg spinal stretch)
3. Eka Pada Paschimottanasana (one leg spinal stretch)
Variation
4. Gatyatmak Paschimottanasana (dynamic back stretch pose)
5. Pada Prasar Paschimottanasana (legs spread back stretch pose) Sequence

6. Pada Prasar Paschimottanasana (legs spread back stretch pose) Variation 1
7. Pada Prasar Paschimottanasana (legs spread back stretch pose) Variation 2
8. Ardha Padma Paschimottanasana (half lotus back stretching pose)
9. Skandhordhva Janu Asana (knee on shoulder pose)
10. Hasta Pada Angushthasana (finger to toe stretch)
11. Meru Akarshanasana (spinal bending pose)
12. Padahastasana (hand to foot pose) variation – dynamic forward bending
13. Sirsha Angustha Yogasana (head to toe pose)
14. Utthita Janu Sirshasana (standing head between knees pose)
15. Utthita Janu Sirshasana (standing head between knees pose) Variation
16. Eka Padottanasana (one leg raised to head pose)
17. Eka Padottanasana (one leg raised to head pose) Variation
18. Bhumi Naman Asana (surrender to the earth pose)

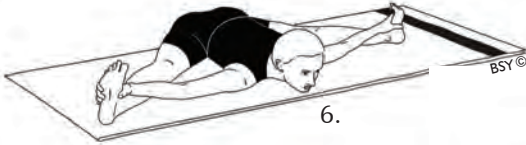




5.



BSY ©

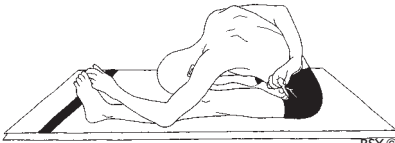


6.



7.

BSY ©



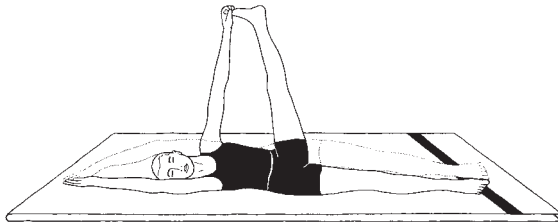
8.

BSY ©



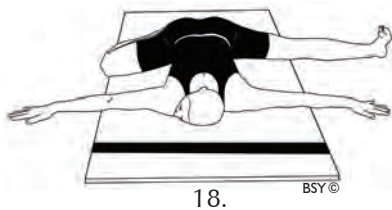
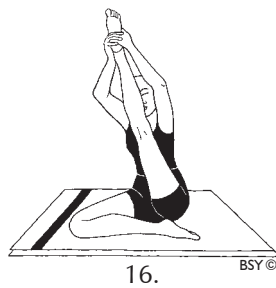
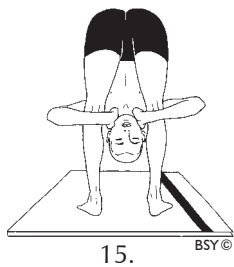
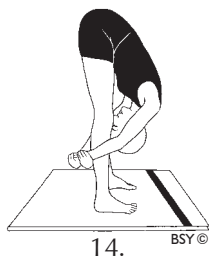
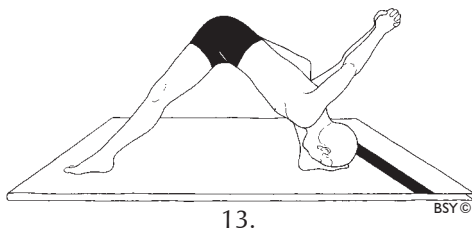
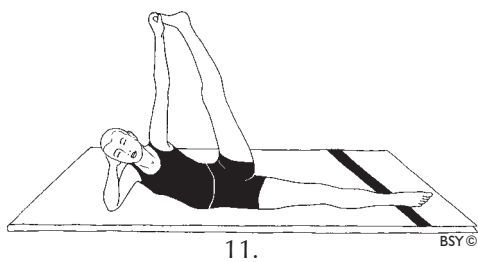
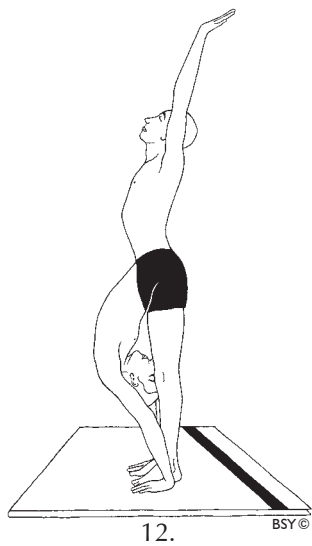
9.

BSY ©



10.

BSY ©



SPINAL TWISTING ASANAS

Why are spinal twisting asanas important?

Swami Satyananda: The spinal twisting asanas are important for spinal health. Every asana program should include at least one practice from this group, preferably following the forward and backward bending postures. The twist imposed on the spine and the whole trunk exercises the muscles, makes the spinal column more flexible and stimulates the spinal nerves. It also has a strong influence on the abdominal muscles, alternately stretching and compressing them as the body twists from one direction to the other.

Most of the spinal twist asanas enhance the pranic flow in the samana region, around the navel. This nourishes organs such as the pancreas, kidneys, stomach, small intestines, liver and gall bladder; relieves associated disorders, and rejuvenates the tissues generally. The samana region is also related to manipura chakra, a plexus of major nadis or pranic channels, supplying the whole body. These asanas therefore have a strong effect on total health and vitality.

On the emotional and psychic levels, controlled twisting and untwisting represents a means of managing the knots and problems one encounters. These asanas give insight and inspire a systematic approach to untying the tangled knots of life.

Why are twisting asanas included in yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Lateral twisting is an important movement for the body to be able to comfortably perform. Generally, the body is twisted to look behind, or to look at something. That movement tends to happen with a jerk, it is not a controlled and guided movement. Therefore, in order to give the body a sense or feeling of continued movement in which the various muscles involved are fully stretched, there are twisting asanas.

In these, the waist is twisted as much as possible, providing a complete squeeze to the internal body parts and

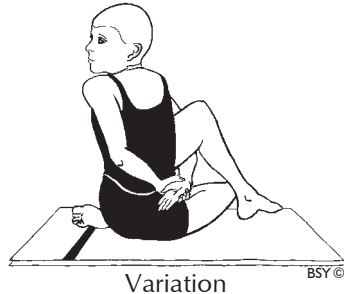
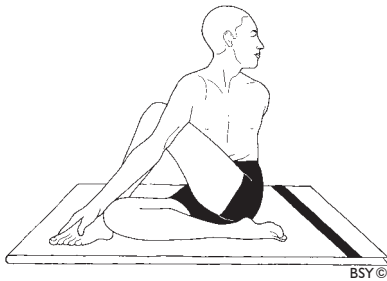
organs. When clothes are washed by hand they are squeezed to remove the excess water. In the same way, in yoga the body is twisted to remove stagnation in the flow of blood. The twisting also helps to release pressure from various joints, especially the spinal cord.

ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA: HALF SPINAL TWIST POSE

What is the origin of ardha matsyendrasana?

Swami Sivananda: *Ardha* means half. This is a half pose. Ardha matsyendrasana takes its name from the sage, Matsyendra, who first taught this asana to the students of hatha yoga. Matsyendra is said to have been the disciple of Lord Shiva.

Once Shiva departed for a lonely island. There he taught Parvati the mysteries of yoga. A fish that happened to be near the shore heard the teachings of Lord Shiva. Shiva came to know this. His heart being filled with mercy, he sprinkled water on this yogi-fish. Immediately, on account of Lord Shiva's grace, the fish became a siddha yogi with a divine body. *Matsya* means fish. This yogi-fish was called by the name Matsyendra.



What is matsyendrasana?

Swami Satyananda: Yogi Matsyendranath, the founder of hatha yoga, practised this asana and thus it is named after him. In English it is called the spinal twist. There are variations in the placement of the arms and hands and the

degree of twisting in the spine. Matsyendrasana is described in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:26):

Vaamoroomoolaarpitadakshapaadam jaanorbahirveshtitavaama-paadam.

Pragrihya tishthetparivartitaangah shreematsyanaathoditamaasanam syaat.

Place the right foot at the base of the left thigh, the left foot at the side of the right knee. Take hold of the left foot with the right hand, pass the left arm behind the waist and remain with the body turned. This asana is described by Sri Matsyendranath.

Do the variations of matsyendrasana have different purposes?

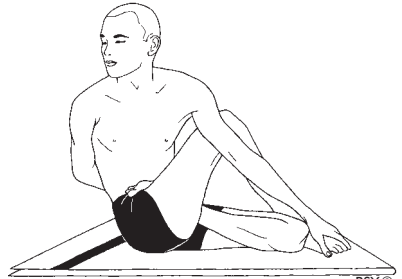
Swami Niranjanananda: It is said that Yogi Matsyendranath used to meditate in this asana exclusively and that's why it is named after him. Matsyendrasana is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:23–24):

*Udaram pashchimaabhaasam kritvaa tishthatyayatnatah;
Namritam vaamapaadam hi dakshajaanoopari nyaset.*

*Tatra yaamyam koorparam cha vaktram yaamyakare'pi cha;
Bhruvormadhye gataa drishtih peetham maatsyendramuchyate.*

Pull the abdomen towards the back, keeping the back straight. Bend the left leg with effort, placing the heel over the right thigh. Support the right elbow on the leg. Placing the chin on the right hand, fix the gaze at the eyebrow centre. This is known as matsyendrasana. (23–24)

The practice as described by Sage Gheranda is half way in difficulty between ardha and poorna matsyendrasana. The legs are positioned as for poorna



Poorna matsyendrasana

BSY©

matsyendrasana, but rather than using the arms to lock the torso into a twist, the head rests on one hand with the elbow supported on the knee.

Whilst in this asana the instruction is, *bhruvornadhye gataa drishtih*, focus the gaze at the eyebrow centre. Spiritually, the concentration is on ajna chakra, which is facilitated in Sage Gheranda's version by gazing at the eyebrow centre.

Sage Gheranda does not give any specific health benefits for this asana. This is probably because the main purpose of the variation he presents is to induce meditation for those who are sufficiently flexible to relax deeply in the posture.

This is also one of the asanas recommended by Yogi Swatmarama in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:27). His description corresponds most closely to the preparatory pose generally known as ardha matsyendrasana. Therefore, he gives some benefits as his variation has therapeutic consequences at many levels:

Matsyendrapeetham jatharapradeeptim prachandarugmandalakhandaanastram.

Abhyaasatah kundalineeprobodham chandrasthiratvam chadadaati pumsaam.

Practising this asana increases the digestive fire to such an incredible capacity that it is the means of removing diseases and thus awakening the serpent power and bringing equilibrium in the bindu.

Note: Poorna matsyendrasana is listed in Chapter 6: Advanced Asanas

What are the benefits of ardha matsyendrasana?

Swami Sivananda: This asana increases appetite by increasing the digestive fire. It destroys terrible diseases. It rouses kundalini and makes the *chandra*, or moon nadi flow steadily. The moon is said to be located above the root of the palate. It drops the cool ambrosial nectar, which is normally wasted by mixing with gastric fire; this asana prevents it.

It keeps the spine elastic and gives a good massage to the abdominal organs. Lumbago and all sorts of muscular rheumatism of the back muscles are cured. The spinal nerve-roots and sympathetic system are toned. Circulation improves. This asana is an auxiliary to paschimottanasana.

How does matsyendrasana help to awaken kundalini?

Swami Satyananda: Matsyendrasana helps to channel the prana in a particular direction so that awakening takes place in the dormant energy centres. It specifically stimulates the navel centre or manipura chakra. Under normal circumstances the rate of pranic vibration is slow. Performing those asanas which direct the prana to the navel centre is important for the awakening of kundalini.

The navel centre is responsible for maintaining the body. When it is underactive or overactive, body functions are not harmonious and if it is sluggish, diseases develop in other areas. If the capacity of manipura is increased systematically, it not only eliminates imbalances and disease, but the dormant potential of sushumna nadi can be awakened.

Manipura is directly connected to the digestive system. Proper digestion and assimilation is the key to good health. Many texts talk about the 'fire' of manipura, i.e. the digestive fire. It is said that a certain fluid produced in the higher brain centres is consumed by this fire, and the result is old age, disease and death. This fluid refers to the neurohormones of the pituitary and pineal glands which activate the other endocrine glands. In yoga it is said that this fluid is stored in bindu visarga. If one can prevent that fluid from falling into the fire of manipura, vitality can be increased and longevity can be cultivated.

The navel region is powered by *samana vayu*, responsible for the assimilation of nutrients and prana from the air and food. Above the waist region where samana operates, *prana vayu* pervades, and one of its functions is to absorb prana. In the region below the navel, *apana vayu* is located and its

chief function is elimination. Prana and apana are the two major forces and normally move in opposite directions. One of the aims of yoga is to make prana and apana move towards each other so they meet in the navel and connect with samana.

Prana vayu is positive energy, apana is negative and samana is neutral. When the two opposite energies are brought together in manipura chakra, there is an explosion of energy and the energy forces its way through sushumna nadi. That is why manipura is such an important centre in the process of awakening kundalini. It is even said in some traditions that kundalini awakening starts from manipura and not in either of the lower centres. The chakras below manipura are concerned with the animal instincts and those above are connected with the higher qualities of the mind. Manipura is midway between the two and is said to be the midpoint between heaven and earth. Matsyendrasana increases the vital capacity of manipura so that it can sustain the effects of kundalini awakening.

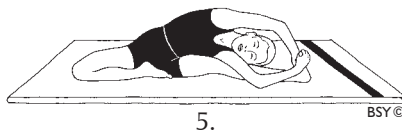
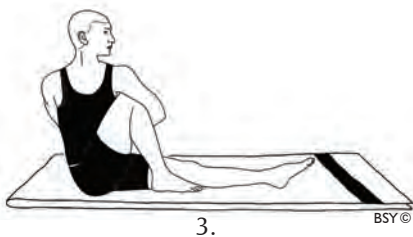
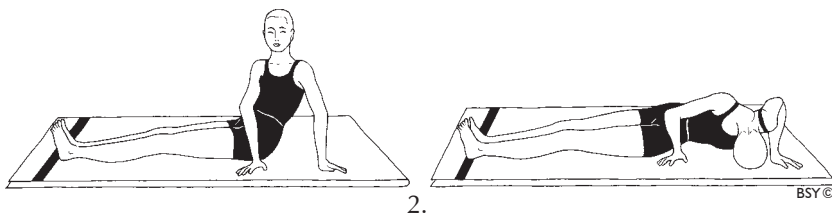
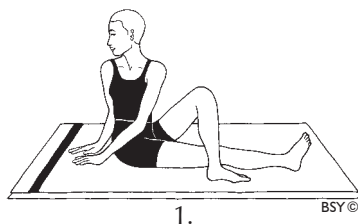
Why is regular practice of ardha matsyendrasana important?

Swami Satyananda: If possible, *ardha matsyendrasana*, the half spinal twist, should be performed in every asana program, after completing a sequence of forward and backward bending asanas.

When the trunk is twisted the muscles and nerves of the back and spine are contracted on one side, while the muscles and nerves on the other side are simultaneously stretched. When the trunk is twisted in the opposite direction, the process is the same but reversed. The overall result is an excellent alternate compression and extension of these nerves and muscles bringing them into the best possible condition. As with many other asanas, sluggish and stagnant blood is squeezed out of the spinal regions and encouraged to recirculate to the heart and lungs for purification, which also contributes much to bringing the spinal muscles and nerves into optimum health.

ADDITIONAL SPINAL TWISTING ASANAS

1. Meru Wakrasana (spinal twist)
2. Bhū Namanasana (spinal twist prostration pose) Sequence
3. Marichyasana (pose of Sage Marichi)
4. Saral ardhā matsyēndrasana (easy half spinal twist)
5. Parivṛitti Janu Sirshasana (spiralled head to knee pose)



INVERTED ASANAS

How are the inverted asanas classified?

Swami Satyananda: Inverted asanas include:

1. Semi-inverted positions where the trunk and head are horizontal, but the feet are raised above the head, such as *poorwa halasana*, preliminary plough pose. Generally, they are not so challenging, but more care is needed if they are also strenuous practices, e.g. *padotthanasana*, raised legs pose, when performed with both legs raised.
2. Semi-inverted positions where the head is below the trunk, such as *padahastana*, hand to foot pose, and *sirshapada bhumi sparshana*, head and foot touching the ground pose.
3. Fully inverted positions such as *sarvangasana*, the shoulder stand, *sirshasana*, the headstand, and *vrischikasana*, scorpion pose.

How important is technique in the practice of inverted asanas?

Swami Satyananda: This important group of asanas must be performed correctly and with the utmost care. It is emphasized that these are powerful practices that must be learned from an experienced teacher.

What are the general effects of inverted asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Inverted asanas reverse the action of gravity on the body; instead of everything being pulled towards the feet, the orientation shifts towards the head. Similarly, on the emotional and psychic levels, inverted asanas change the normal patterns, throwing a new light on old patterns of behaviour and being.

Generally, these practices are refreshing and revitalizing. They improve health, reduce anxiety and stress, and increase self confidence. They also increase mental power, concentration, and the capacity to sustain large workloads without strain.

Inverted asanas nourish the neurones and flush out toxins. Blood and lymph, accumulated in the lower limbs, pelvis and abdomen, are drained back to the heart, then circulated to the lungs, purified and recirculated to all parts of the body. This process nourishes the cells of the whole human organism. The enriched blood flow also allows the pituitary gland to operate more efficiently, tuning the entire endocrine system. This has a positive effect on the metabolic processes and even on ways of thinking.

What is the effect of inverted asanas on the breath?

Swami Satyananda: While the body is in an inverted asana, the breath becomes slow and deep, maximizing the exchange of carbon dioxide and oxygen, and generally encouraging correct respiration. Due to this deep breathing, the abdominal organs – the liver, spleen, stomach, kidneys and pancreas – receive a powerful massage, helping them to perform their functions more efficiently.

What are the effects of inverted asanas on the brain?

Swami Satyananda: When the body is inverted the brain receives a richer supply of blood, at a slightly increased pressure, by the action of gravity. The capillaries are elastic and dilate or constrict, depending on the blood pressure. The increased blood pressure during inverted poses dilates the capillaries and also opens capillaries that have become closed.

The effect is that the brain in general, including areas that have ceased to function, receives an increased amount of nourishment. This consequently rejuvenates brain cells. Accumulated toxins and waste materials are also effectively removed by the strong flushing action of the blood and eventually eliminated from the body. Under these conditions, the brain, the associated endocrinal glands, and in turn all the parts of the body controlled by them are encouraged to function efficiently. The overall result is a general improvement in physical and mental health.

What are the effects of inverted asanas on the circulatory system?

Swami Satyananda: During inverted poses, the return flow from the lower body is assisted by the force of gravity, resulting in a greater amount of blood returning to the heart. Consequently, since the heart can only pump as much blood as it receives, the increased venous return allows it to pump a greater arterial volume through the body. This greater quantity of blood flows through the lungs and produces an improved exchange of oxygen for carbon dioxide. More oxygen is consequently transferred to the body cells and carbon dioxide is more efficiently removed. The increased circulation also ensures a more effective removal of all types of toxins and a more efficient supply of food nourishment throughout the body. Further, any stagnant or sluggish blood in the abdomen, legs, and sexual organs is replaced by a good flow of purified blood and so fatigue is eliminated in these areas, particularly the legs.

During inversion of the body, the increased blood volume in circulation, together with the assistance of gravity, supplies the upper parts of the body, including the brain, with an enriched blood flow at a slightly higher pressure than normal. This again ensures improved nourishment of the cells and a more efficient removal of toxins.

Inverted poses, if practised regularly and for a reasonable duration, by improving the flushing action of the blood, actively assist the breaking up of sclerotic deposits, which tend to build up on the linings of the blood vessels. These deposits are closely related to the occurrence of coronary thrombosis.

Since the time between heartbeats becomes considerably longer during the performance of inverted poses, the heart is rested. Though the blood pressure in the upper regions of the body increases during inverted poses, the pressure actually drops below normal after termination of the asana. This further rests the heart and also the arteries.

What is the effect of inverted asanas on the digestive and excretory systems?

Swami Satyananda: By modifying blood circulation, inverted poses improve digestion. The relevant organs are decongested and consequently perform their duties more effectively. The decongestion of the liver reduces the impediment to blood flow through the digestive organs, enhancing the digestive process. The removal of stagnant blood is also invaluablely assisted by the massage that the liver receives from the diaphragm. The blood volume pumped by the heart is increased, mainly due to the recirculation of previously stagnant blood, and so the organs receive a still greater blood supply.

Thus besides relieving indigestion, inverted poses can improve the supply of nourishment to the whole body, improving its general functioning and health.

The urinary organs, particularly the kidneys, and the large intestines, are also decongested and receive an enhanced blood supply during inverted poses. In this way, inefficient activity of the faecal organs, especially a weak peristaltic action connected with constipation, and urinary problems, can be relieved by regular inversion of the body.

What is the effect of inverted poses on the reproductive system?

Swami Satyananda: The sex glands and organs, which are liable to the accumulation of stagnant blood and easily lose their functional efficiency, especially as one becomes older, can be decongested and normalized by inverted poses.

It should be remembered that the sex glands, which both regulate the reproductive functions and the masculine or feminine body characteristics, are ultimately controlled by the pituitary gland in the brain. This gland is also encouraged to function optimally by inverted poses. The sexual functions therefore benefit in a threefold manner: through improved operation of the pituitary gland, the sex glands and the sexual organs themselves.

What is the effect of inverted poses on the ears and eyes?

Swami Satyananda: The effective functioning of the eyes depends on a particularly good supply of oxygen. Thus the inverted poses, by increasing the blood flow to the eyes, also supplies them with a supplementary quantity of oxygen. A further improvement in the powers of vision is brought about by the increased blood supply to the cerebral centre that controls the operation of the eyes and interprets the information that they receive.

The ears also benefit from inverted poses by the enriched blood circulation.

How do inversions affect the influence of gravity on the internal organs?

Swami Satyananda: The inversion of the body causes various organs to alter their position relative to each other and to change the normal direction of forces that occur between them, bringing many benefits.

During inverted poses the movement of the diaphragm towards the abdomen is resisted by the weight of the abdominal organs in the direction of the head instead of towards the feet, as in the normal sitting or standing position. This strengthens the diaphragm, which is composed of a thin, but strong muscle sheet, since it is required to move against a greater resistance than normal during the period of inhalation.

This abdominal mass also causes a slight increase of air pressure in the lungs during exhalation, by more effectively and quickly returning the diaphragm towards the lungs. This helps to uncrumple the tiny alveoli, air cells, in the lungs. Since these are the means of interchanging oxygen and carbon dioxide to and from the pulmonary artery, the body in general benefits by an improved removal of carbon dioxide and a greater intake of oxygen. This is over and above the better exchange obtained by improved blood circulation.

Why are inversions beneficial when it is such an unnatural position for the body?

Swami Satyananda: One might suggest that it should be unnecessary or even unnatural for man to invert himself for a period of time. However, it is accepted by many anatomists that man is not yet fully adapted by evolution to the upright standing position and no doubt it will take countless thousands of years for the human body to be perfectly designed for the bipedal position.

In quadrupeds, such as horses and dogs, organs are suspended from a horizontal spine; compared to man, these animals are generally less susceptible to organic malfunctions. The blood in most of the body of quadrupeds travels horizontally to and from the heart; it does not need to struggle much against gravity, compared to the human body. The inactive, sedentary lives that many people lead make the 'unnatural' practice of inverted poses almost a necessity to counteract the influences of the 'unnatural' modern day life.

What are the mental and psychological effects of inverted asanas?

Swami Satyananda: A growing number of medical scientists are advocating that the partial cause of nervous maladies and their sublimated manifestations such as fatigue, nervous tremors, weakened memory and depression is insufficient nourishment of the brain. All these malfunctions can be eased, if not eliminated in some cases, by regular inversion of the body.

Inverted poses can improve the practitioner's intellectual abilities by enhancing the powers of perception, concentration, comprehension, and assimilation. This does not mean these aptitudes are developed beyond individual capabilities. Each individual has a maximum aptitude beyond which, in all probability, it is impossible to proceed, but the centres in the brain that provide these abilities are allowed to operate nearer their optimum capacity. Few people, if any, use these aptitudes at anywhere near their

highest potential; inverted poses can help one to realize one's higher capabilities.

Inverted poses bring about a feeling of tranquillity, a state that many people rarely experience, even during sleep. Stress, anxiety, nervousness and jealousy are generally regarded by both science and yoga as the fundamental cause of many, if not all, mental and physical ailments. The individual, by experiencing tranquillity even for a short period, can move towards complete equilibrium and the prevention or removal of illnesses, together with a more contented life.

Alpha waves, electrical wave patterns which are emitted from the brain and are related to a state of relaxed and heightened awareness and inner peace, are profusely heightened during meditation and also during extended and relaxed performances of inverted poses, particularly sirshasana. These are believed to be closely associated with the tranquillity that occurs after a reasonable duration of inverted poses. Though these are only measured effects and not causes, they do indicate that notable changes are occurring within the brain during inversion of the body.

What are the spiritual benefits of inverted asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Traditionally, inverted asanas are used to sublimate and transform sexual energy into spiritual energy. The aim of the practices, in this context, is to stimulate the chakras, open sushumna nadi and raise the kundalini to bring about psychic awakening. While it is unlikely that kundalini will be raised through practice of these asanas alone, inverted postures undoubtedly improve the quality of meditation and concentration, refining the consciousness and enabling it to enter unexplored levels of the mind.

Those people who want to obtain spiritual benefits should practise inverted poses until they can be done for a long duration with equilibrium and relaxation, and without discomfort. This prevents any attention being distracted towards the body. During the performance of

inverted asanas, the usual yogic practices such as breath concentration, ajapa japa and mantra repetition can be done as well as concentration on the chakra associated with the particular asana being used.

Though most unlikely to produce high states of spiritual illumination, inversion of the body can improve meditation and concentration and can make the consciousness more subtle, encouraging it to go into the innermost regions of the chitta. Swami Sivananda writes that the practice of sirshasana in particular, can allow one to distinctly hear the anahata sounds, or mystical inner voice.

Beginners to meditation, or people who have minds that continually drift from one thought to another, are strongly advised to do inverted poses, such as sirshasana and sarvangasana, immediately before starting to meditate. A few minutes allocated in this way is more than worthwhile. The inverted poses should be preceded by other asanas to obtain the best results.

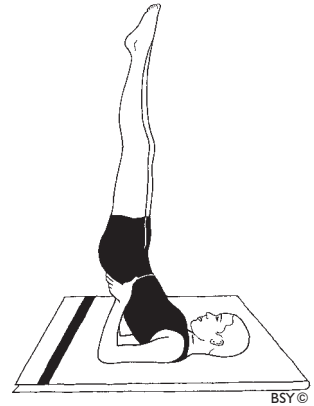
VIPAREETA KARANI ASANA: INVERTED POSE

What is the meaning and significance of vipareeta karani mudra?

Swami Satyananda: In Sanskrit *vipareeta* means inverted, *karani* means action, and *mudra* is usually interpreted as a gesture that symbolizes externally, by means of the body, an inner feeling or attitude.

English names of the asana, though not direct translations of the Sanskrit name, include: the half-shoulder stand pose, the inverted gesture, and the inverted pose.

Though its name signifies that it is a mudra, it is generally classified as an asana by present day authorities, possibly due to its close



resemblance to sarvangasana. Classical hatha yoga texts attach great importance to this mudra.

What is the difference between vipareeta karani asana and vipareeta karani mudra?

Swami Niranjanananda: There is a version of vipareeta karani mudra which is taught as an asana for the considerable physical benefits of the inverted posture. In this method the legs are kept straight and perpendicular to the floor, rather than being tilted forward over the upper body. The feet are not brought in line with the line of sight. It is a much simpler technique. One simply breathes normally in the final position. This practice is known as vipareeta karani asana, but it is not exactly the correct position for the mudra.

How is vipareeta karani described in classical hatha yoga texts?

Swami Satyananda: No detailed description of the method of performing vipareeta karani is given in old texts. The brief descriptions that are given – legs upwards, arms and head on the ground – describe all the inverted poses. The ancient treatises say that vipareeta karani should be learnt from a guru, which is presumably the reason why its technique is not described. In *Gheranda Samhita* (3:47–48) it is written:

*Bhoomau shirashcha samsthaapya karayugmam samaahitah;
Urdhvapaadah sthiro bhootvaa vipareetakaree mataa.*

*Mudraam cha saadhayennityam jaraam mrityum cha naashayet;
Sa siddhah sarvalokeshu pralaye’pi na seedati.*

Place the head on the ground, provide support with both hands and raise both legs; this is vipareeta karani mudra. (47)

By practising it daily, old age and death are eliminated. The practitioner of this mudra attains siddhi (perfection) in all the lokas (worlds) and is not grieved even at the time of dissolution (of the universe). (48)

It is possible that the practice as it is known and understood today is but one version of a number of possibilities, including perhaps sirshasana and sarvangasana. In other words, it is plausible that vipareeta karani mudra was originally a collective name of all the inverted poses, the names sirshasana and the others being of recent origin. This would certainly explain why an asana as important as sirshasana is not even mentioned in the old books.

What is the difference between vipareeta karani asana and sarvangasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: The practice of vipareeta karani is similar to the shoulder stand, *sarvangasana*. The major difference is the angle of the back to the floor. In sarvangasana the back and legs should be perpendicular; in vipareeta karani the back is maintained at a forty-five degree angle to the floor and legs. This means the throat is not blocked and allows the flow of blood to the brain.

Why is vipareeta karani referred to in the hatha yoga scriptures, while sarvangasana is not mentioned?

Swami Satyananda: The thyroid influences the metabolism of the whole body including the digestive processes. Correct functioning of the thyroid ensures efficient operation of the digestive processes, and ensures that the body maintains its youthful vitality as mentioned in the ancient scriptures. Vipareeta karani mudra assists in maintaining the health of the abdomen and thyroid. However, at this stage one might ask, “Why were the ancient yogis so enthusiastic about this mudra when sarvangasana influences the thyroid to a greater degree?”

A possible answer is that vipareeta karani mudra, by not constricting the throat as much as sarvangasana, allows a larger proportion of blood to flow to the brain and to the pituitary gland. Since both the thyroid and pituitary glands act in conjunction with each other, this in effect could give a more profound influence on the bodily metabolism.

One statement by the ancient yogis which is reasonably easy to interpret is their reference to the fact that flabby skin will disappear after six months' practice of this mudra. As explained in the benefits of inverted poses in general, the extra flow of blood in the facial region gives better nourishment of the skin tissue and so revitalizes the skin. Further, by improving the metabolism of the body, unnecessary fat and flabbiness of the body are removed.

Vipareeta karani mudra is traditionally linked with sex sublimation for spiritual purposes and it is believed to acts extensively on the gonads, sexual glands. This action on the sexual glands is probably brought about by its simultaneous influence on both the pituitary and thyroid glands, which extensively control the operation of the gonads, as well as the other endocrinal glands.

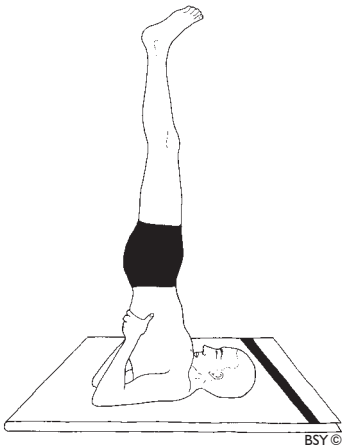
The important point to consider is that the ancient yogis had profound respect for this mudra and obviously had good reasons.

SARVANGASANA: SHOULDER STAND POSE

What is the meaning and significance of sarvangasana?

Swami Satyananda: The meaning of the Sanskrit word *sarva* is entire, all or whole; and *anga* means body, limbs, parts or organs. Thus *sarvanga* may be translated as 'the whole body' or 'all the limbs'. Sarvangasana is so called due to its influence on the entire body and its functions. The most common English name of this asana, the 'shoulder stand pose', is not a direct translation.

Sarvangasana is also sometimes known as: *salamba sarvangasana*, supported shoulder stand pose, pan-physical pose, candle pose, and complete pose.



The Sanskrit name 'sarvangasana', describes this asana most aptly, summing up the enormous influence it has on the functions of the entire human organism. Sarvangasana gives essentially the same effects as sirshasana while being considerably easier to perform. Whilst the influences of both of these asanas on the body are basically similar, sirshasana acts particularly on the brain, including the pituitary gland, influencing the thyroid to a lesser degree, while sarvangasana acts especially on the thyroid, affecting the brain and pituitary gland to a lesser degree. They therefore supplement each other, and for maximum benefits should be performed one after the other.

What asanas are recommended for those who are short of time?

Swami Sivananda: When one does not have much time to practise a course of asanas, sarvangasana should be done daily without fail, along with sirshasana and paschimottanasana, I have taught this asana to hundreds of people. I invariably recommend sirshasana and sarvangasana combined with paschimottanasana to those who approach me; these three alone can keep one in perfect health. All have unanimously reported to me the wonderful, mysterious, beneficial results of sarvangasana. As soon as one comes down from this asana it feels bracing and gives a new, vigorous tone. It is an ideal pick-me-up.

How does sarvangasana improve one's health?

Swami Sivananda: This is a mysterious asana which gives wonderful results. It is termed 'all-members pose' as all parts of the body are engaged when it is performed. Sarvangasana keeps the thyroid healthy, which means healthy functioning of all the organs of the body. It keeps the spine quite elastic. Elasticity of the spine means everlasting youth; it prevents the bones from early ossification, preserving one's youth and destroying the ravages of old age. Sarvangasana helps one maintain celibacy.

Sarvangasana is a powerful blood tonic and purifier, and tones the nerves. It is a cheap, readily available blood, nervine and digestive tonic, at one's disposal at all times. Sarvangasana reduces one's doctor's bills.

What are the general health benefits of sarvangasana?

Swami Satyananda: Sarvangasana produces all the general effects of inverted poses, but with a distinctive influence on the thyroid and parathyroid endocrinal glands. Though all the inverted poses affect these glands, the effect is much less than sarvangasana. It is the influence on the thyroid and parathyroid glands that bring about changes in the whole body.

Regular practice of sarvangasana, principally by its favourable influence on the thyroid, ensures health of the entire body and can rejuvenate aging bodies. Since the thyroid controls the metabolism of the whole body, sarvangasana helps one maintain the correct body weight, assuming of course that the practitioner does not eat excessive amounts of food.

Sarvangasana helps maintain the nervous system in optimum working condition, helps protect the body from infection, and improves the functions of all the body's systems.

It should be noted that the hormones secreted by the thyroid are partially controlled by the pituitary gland. During sarvangasana, the pituitary gland also receives an enriched blood supply, though not as much as in sirshasana, mainly due to impeded flow at the neck. Since both these controllers are regulated, the functions they control by the secretion of various hormones also benefit.

Sarvangasana's action on the parathyroid ensures correct bone growth and regeneration, and can prevent premature ossification, hardening, of the bones.

What is the effect of sarvangasana on respiration?

Swami Satyananda: The position of the body during sarvangasana means that the practitioner must breathe

abdominally: the pressure between the chest and the chin completely prevents the movement of the ribs towards the head (clavicular respiration) and imposes a severe limitation on expansion of the ribs outwards (intercostals respiration). Only the movement of the diaphragm is unimpeded, apart from the weight of the abdominal organs, and the practitioner is forced to do abdominal breathing.

This asana is particularly useful for people who suffer from asthma, since it obliges them to breathe diaphragmatically, whereas normally they would tend to breathe with an accentuated clavicular respiration.

As with inverted poses generally, the redistribution of the weight of the abdominal organs improves respiration. Additionally, certain nerves which innervate the respiratory system are stimulated, further improving respiratory function.

What is the effect of sarvangasana on the upper body?

Swami Satyananda: The pressure of the chest against the chin during sarvangasana specifically directs an enriched blood supply to other organs in the neck region, as well as the thyroid and parathyroid glands. These include the ears, the lungs, the thymus and the tonsils, important lymph nodes which produce antibodies for the protection of the body from infection. All these organs function more efficiently due to the extra nourishment.

The thymus, which is situated in the upper part of the chest and is sometimes classified as an endocrinal gland, plays an important part in the normal physical and mental growth of children. Sarvangasana is recommended for children to ensure efficient operation of this gland and hence normal development. The thymus also plays an immunological role in both children and adults, so its correct functioning ensures the autotherapeutic capabilities of the body are fully active.

The salivary glands which surround the mouth are also influenced by this asana. Since the saliva, containing ptyalin,

is essential for good digestion of food, the digestive functions of the body are enhanced.

An enriched blood supply is directed to the face and forehead, improving the general complexion and removing minor wrinkles, caused partly by under-nourishment of the facial tissue.

Sarvangasana is especially useful for eliminating ailments of the throat, nasal catarrh, tonsillitis and common colds.

What is the effect of sarvangasana on the spine?

Swami Satyananda: Many asanas bend the spine in the back in a forward direction. Sarvangasana is one of the few asanas, including halasana, which bends the vertebral column in the neck in a forward direction. Thus, it keeps this area supple and improves the articulation between the individual cervical vertebrae.

What is the effect of sarvangasana on the nervous system?

Swami Satyananda: Sarvangasana influences the brain, but not as much as sirshasana. The enriched blood supply to the neck region, however, has a particularly beneficial stimulating and regulating effect on the cervical spinal cord, which is encased by the vertebral column, and the eight cervical spinal nerves which branch out from the spinal cord in this region. These nerves innervate the muscles of the neck, face, the upper trunk and arms, through a group of nerves which also innervate the diaphragm, therefore having an important influence on respiration. Sarvangasana helps to ensure smooth nervous activity of these parts of the body.

Also arising in the neck region are various nerves forming part of the parasympathetic nervous system. This is part of the autonomic nervous system and partly controls the functioning of the internal organs connected with blood circulation and digestion. Sarvangasana stimulates these nerves, improving the associated functions.

What is the effect of sarvangasana on blood pressure and stress?

Swami Satyananda: In the neck are a collection of receptors called carotid sinuses. These are sensitive to changes in blood pressure; when the pressure increases these receptors cause the heartbeat to slow down and the blood pressure to reduce.

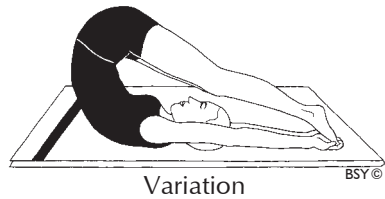
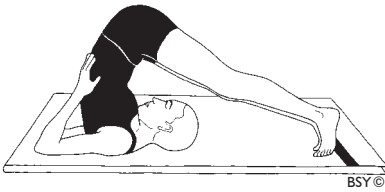
During sarvangasana these sinuses are compressed by the position of the neck, keeping the heartbeat and blood pressure at a reasonable level throughout the asana. This is an advantage of sarvangasana over sirshasana, where the blood pressure rises during performance, though it does drop after completion.

Also, compression of the carotid sinuses induces tranquillity of the brain by means of sinus nerves which connect to the brain. Due to this sarvangasana is particularly useful for removing anxiety and stress.

HALASANA: PLOUGH POSE

What is the meaning of halasana?

Swami Satyananda: In Sanskrit *hala* means plough. This asana is so called as it resembles a type of plough that was used in ancient times and is still used widely in India today.



When should halasana be practised within an asana sequence?

Swami Satyananda: This is the ideal asana to practise in conjunction with sarvangasana, preferably performing halasana directly from sarvangasana. It is a good preparatory pose for paschimottanasana.

Why should halasana be practised after sarvangasana?

Swami Sivananda: Halasana fulfils and amplifies sarvangasana. A large quantity of blood is poured into the spinal cord, the spinal roots of nerves, the sympathetic ganglia, and the muscles of the back. Hence, they are well nourished. The muscles of the back are alternatively contracted, relaxed and then pulled and stretched; they draw a good supply of blood by these various movements and are well nourished.

The vertebral column becomes supple and elastic. It is twisted and rolled, as it were, like a piece of canvas sheet. The vertebral column is a very important structure. It supports the whole body. It contains the spinal cord, spinal nerves and sympathetic system. Therefore it must be kept healthy, strong and elastic by the practice of halasana.

Halasana prevents the early ossification of the vertebral bones. Old age manifests quickly on account of early ossification; bones become hard and brittle in the degenerative process. Those who practice halasana are nimble, agile and full of energy. One who practises halasana can never become lazy.

What is the effect of the position of the legs in halasana?

Swami Satyananda: Halasana gives the general benefits of all inverted poses, closely imitating sarvangasana, but at a decreased level in the neck, brain and head. This is mainly due to the fact that the venous blood in the legs does not drain to the heart and so the effective blood circulation is not as great as in other inverted poses. Also, for this reason, people who suffer from varicose veins will gain little or no benefit from this asana, unless it is practised in series with sarvangasana or any other inverted pose.

How does halasana maintain youthfulness?

Swami Satyananda: Halasana is one of the best asanas for developing and maintaining a supple spine. A definite relationship appears to exist between the flexibility of

the spine and a person's age, not in years but in physical condition and mental attitude. Youthfulness is characterized by a supple spine, whilst senility is characterized by a rigid spine. By helping to maintain or develop a flexible spine, halasana keeps the body youthful and full of vitality.

Halasana ensures the efficient functioning of the thyroid, which also has a large influence on the aging process. A malfunctioning thyroid tends to hasten the aging process, whereas a perfectly functioning thyroid maintains youthfulness.

Thus halasana acts simultaneously in two directions, spine and thyroid, to maintain youthful vigour in body and mind.

What is the effect of halasana on the abdomen?

Swami Satyananda: Halasana strengthens the abdominal muscles, helping to prevent abdominal sagging due to weak musculature. It also assists the drainage of stagnant blood in the abdominal region, improving the functioning of the abdominal organs. The flexion of the trunk in this area compresses the internal organs and increases the effectiveness of the massage to the organs due to the motion of the diaphragm. For these reasons, halasana helps to eliminate constipation and dyspepsia and generally revitalizes organs such as the liver, spleen, kidneys, pancreas, and suprarenal glands.

Halasana is useful in normalizing the size of an enlarged liver and spleen, and in curing diabetes by prompting the pancreas to produce insulin. Many diseases and maladies have their origin in the abdomen. Therefore, halasana has beneficial repercussions throughout the body.

What is the effect of halasana on the nervous system?

Swami Satyananda: Halasana squeezes stagnant blood from the back region, encouraging a rich supply of purified blood to the back after completion of the asana. The consequently improved supply of nourishment to this area improves

the operation of the nerves of the spinal cord and the sympathetic nervous system, which runs beside the spine and innervates the internal organs of the body. The overall result is a general revitalization of the nervous system and its associated functions.

Where should the awareness be focused during halasana?

Swami Satyananda: For physical benefits, the concentration should be directed to the area of the body that the practitioner particularly wants to influence, whilst firmly believing that a curative process is in operation. Those people who are doing the asana to maintain the body in a healthy condition can concentrate on the abdomen or the spine.

Spiritual aspirants should concentrate on manipura chakra, the psychic centre located in the naval region, sometimes associated with the solar plexus.

What are the effects of halasana compared with forward bending asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Halasana combines the benefits of inverted asanas and forward bending asanas, being almost an upside down form of paschimottanasana.

Halasana is most effective in bending the spine, whereas the forward bending poses produce the maximum stretch of the spine. Additionally, halasana predominantly acts on the upper spine, whilst the forward bending poses have a stronger influence on the lower spine. Thus, these two types of asanas, practised in conjunction with each other, exert the maximum influence on the whole spine in the forward direction.

What is the subtle effect of halasana?

Swami Satyananda: Besides its physical benefits, halasana, practised with attention, can induce states of *pratyahara*, sense withdrawal, as a preparation for meditation techniques.

SIRSHASANA: HEADSTAND POSE

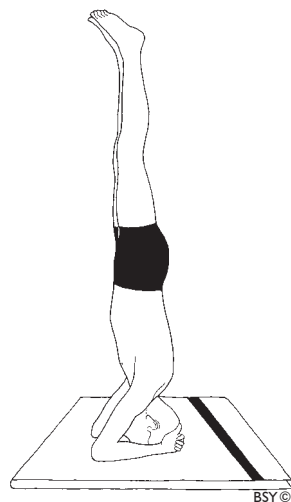
What is the meaning and significance of sirshasana?

Swami Satyananda: The Sanskrit word *sirsha* means head. The English name is usually given as the ‘headstand pose’.

Sirshasana is often referred to as ‘the king of all asanas’ and some people say that this title has authenticity in ancient texts. This, however, does not appear to be so. Interestingly, none of the known ancient books give any specific reference to sirshasana. In all probability, throughout the history of yoga, sirshasana has been part of esoteric yoga practice and has been passed from guru to disciple by word of mouth and personal tuition.

There is some justification for such a tradition, as if it is performed incorrectly or under the wrong circumstances, sirshasana can cause more damage than good. It is only in recent years that this asana has been fully described in books and gained favour with large numbers of people.

The important consideration, however, is that whilst there may be no recorded validity for its title, ‘king of all asanas’, this description is justified by the enormous benefits that sirshasana can bring to the practitioner, physically, mentally and spiritually.



Why is sirshasana known as the king of asanas?

Swami Sivananda: Sirshasana is really a blessing and a nectar: words fail to adequately describe its beneficial results and effects. In this asana the brain can draw plenty of prana and blood as it acts against the force of gravity and draws an abundance of blood from the heart. Memory increases admirably. Lawyers, occultists and thinkers will appreciate

this asana. By itself it leads to natural pranayama and samadhi. In sirshasana the breath becomes finer and finer. There is real pleasure and exhilaration of spirit in this asana.

Great benefit is derived by sitting for meditation after sirshasana. The anahata sounds can be heard quite distinctly. Young, robust people should perform this asana. The advantages that are derived from it are incalculable. Sirshasana invigorates, energizes and vivifies. Those who practice it should not have frequent copulation.

Sirshasana is a panacea, a cure-all, a sovereign for all diseases. It brightens the psychic faculties and awakens kundalini shakti. Wrinkles and greyness disappear. The *Yoga Tattwa Upanishad* says, "He who practices this for three hours daily, conquers time."

What experiences have people had by remaining in sirshasana for some time?

Swami Sivananda: There are people who do this asana for two or three hours at one stretch. Pandit Raghunath Sastri at Badrinarayan was very fond of this asana and used to practise it for two or three hours. There was a yogi at Varanasi who entered into samadhi doing this asana. Sri Jaspat Rai, P.V. Acharyaji Maharaj and others were doing this asana regularly for more than one hour daily at a stretch.

Sri Prakash Jung had swelling of the feet and disease of the heart. The muscles of the heart were not able to contract and dilate properly in its function of pumping. That was the diagnosis of doctors. He practised sirshasana regularly for a few days. All swelling disappeared. The heart functioned properly. There was no pain at all. He used to do this asana for half an hour daily.

Pandit Surya Narayan was doing this asana. His memory considerably improved. The pain in the back and shoulders from chronic rheumatism vanished completely.

When any sort of prayer or japa is done during the course of asanas, it also becomes a tapas. Siddhis come. In the days of yore, tapasvins used to stand on the head for a

period of twelve years and repeat the mantra of the chosen deity or guru. There are many instances of this in the *Mahabharata*. Japa or meditation in sirshasana touches the heart of the Lord deeply. He showers His blessings quickly. Many difficulties are obviated.

What attitude should one have towards practising sirshasana?

Swami Sivananda: Perform this asana very, very slowly and avoid jerks. Do it slowly. Do not be anxious. Be calm. Be cool. There is eternity before you. On this score, do not be sluggish in your practice.

How do the benefits of sirshasana differ from other inverted poses?

Swami Satyananda: Sirshasana gives all the general benefits of the other inverted poses, but with a particular emphasis on the brain and pituitary gland. The other inverted poses also affect these functions but at a diminished level. Thus, sirshasana and its variations can bring about profound influences on all functions of the body, since they are controlled by the brain, nervous system and endocrinal system.

What are the effects of sirshasana on blood pressure and respiration?

Swami Satyananda: Various scientific tests have been made on people performing sirshasana. These indicate that the systolic pressure (blood pressure during the contraction phase of the heart), tends to become much higher than normal. After discontinuing sirshasana, the systolic pressure becomes slightly subnormal, returning to its normal pressure after some time. Tests also indicate that after termination of sirshasana there is a notably rapid fall in blood pressure, which continues for a reasonably long time, depending on the individual.

The frequency of respiration, and hence the intake of air to the lungs, is considerably reduced, but the transfer of

oxygen to the blood is appreciably increased. These results apply particularly if the practitioner of sirshasana is as relaxed as possible.

What is the effect of sirshasana on the spine?

Swami Satyananda: One of the greatest hazards of living a sedentary life is the fact that most people are required to sit or stand in one position, which is often posturally incorrect, for long periods of time. This, together with the constant force of gravity acting on the body, imposes a severe burden on the vertebral column.

When one practises sirshasana, not only is the affect of gravity on the vertebral column reversed, but it assumes a postural position that is structurally correct providing the top of the head rests on the floor and not the forehead. In other words, no strain is imposed on the spine, other than that for which it is designed.

If one studies a diagram of the human skeleton, it will be immediately obvious that the entire weight of the trunk, head and arms is supported by the vertebral column; this in turn is supported about the articulation of the fifth lumbar vertebra with the sacrum in the region of the hips. Besides bearing this load, this joint has to facilitate forward, backwards and sideways movements. This renders the disc between the fifth lumbar vertebra and sacrum more vulnerable to strain than all the other vertebral discs. During the practice of sirshasana the weight sustained at this articulation is reversed so that it only bears the weight of the legs and pelvis, bringing relief to this region. The cervical vertebrae, providing the neck is not excessively weak, can easily support the weight of the body, providing they are not tensed but allowed to hunch or compress in the way that they are designed.

What is the effect of sirshasana on respiration?

Swami Satyananda: Modern man in general does not breathe correctly, even though this is one of the most important functions in the body. People tend to use a much smaller

capacity of the lungs than is possible, only using the lungs more fully when they physically exert themselves. For maximum functional efficiency, breathing should be deep and slow; sirshasana particularly encourages this.

In sirshasana the weight of abdominal organs acts on the diaphragm, assisting exhalation. Due to the fixed capacity of the lungs one can only inhale as much air as has previously been exhaled. Thus, both exhalation and inhalation are improved, the enhanced exhalation removing a larger amount of residual air and carbon dioxide from the lungs together with toxins and germs which tend to accumulate in this stagnant air while the enhanced inhalation draws in larger quantities of life giving oxygen.

Where should concentration be focused during sirshasana?

Swami Satyananda: If physical benefits are wanted in a particular part of the body, concentration should be directed to that region. For example, to cure varicose veins in the legs, concentrate on the legs and imagine effective drainage of blood from the veins and the relaxation of the veins.

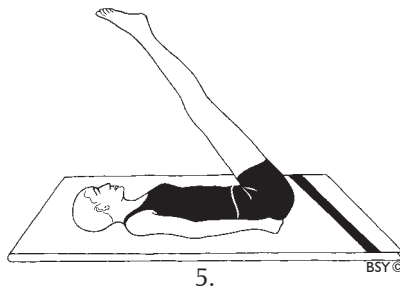
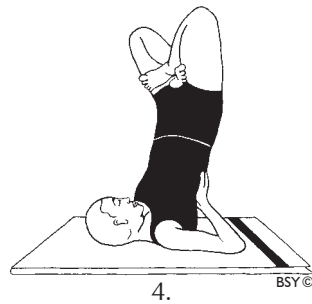
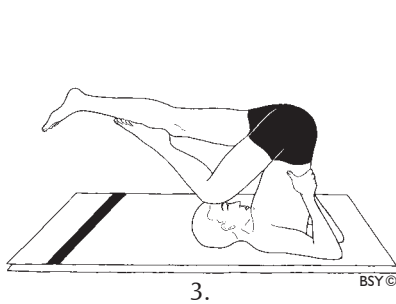
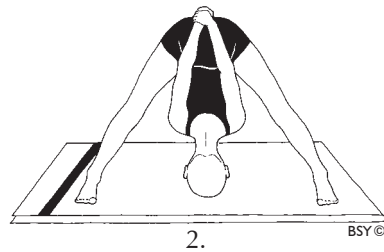
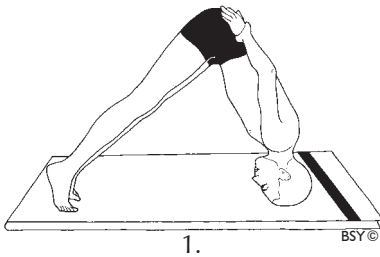
If mental benefits are desired, concentration should be on the brain, with visualization of the greater flow of blood, whilst also applying autosuggestion: believing whole heartedly that the required mental benefits will be obtained.

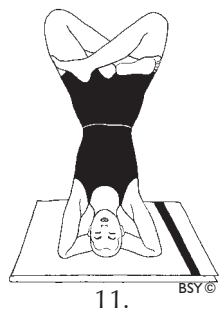
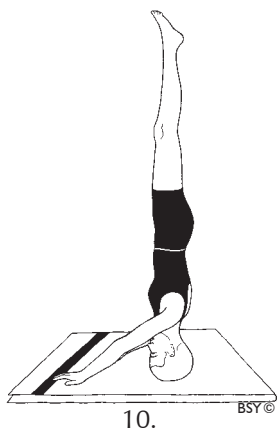
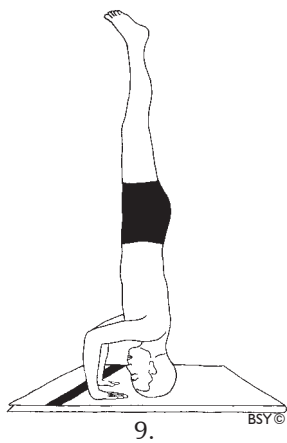
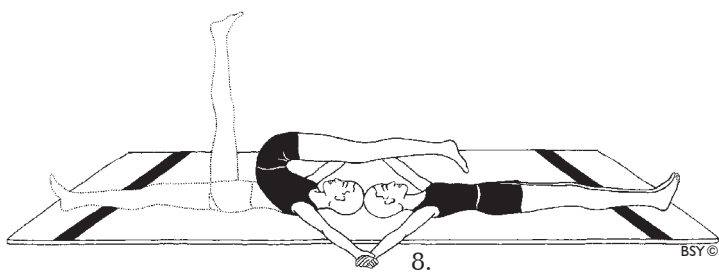
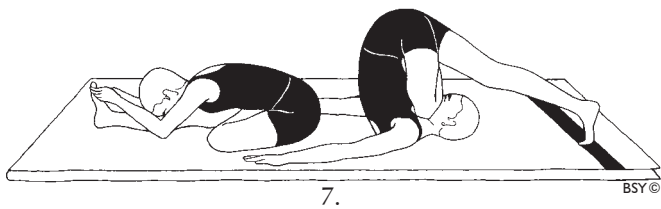
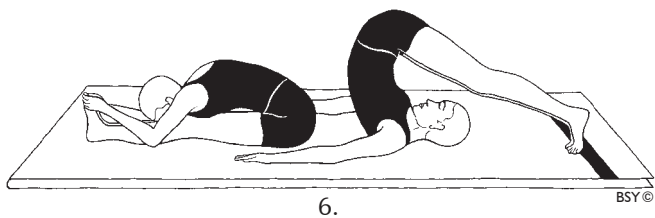
If spiritual benefits are the aim, many possibilities exist, though the most usual is to concentrate on *sahasrara chakra*, the thousand-petalled lotus, where it is said Lord Shiva awaits the ascent of the kundalini or psychic consciousness.

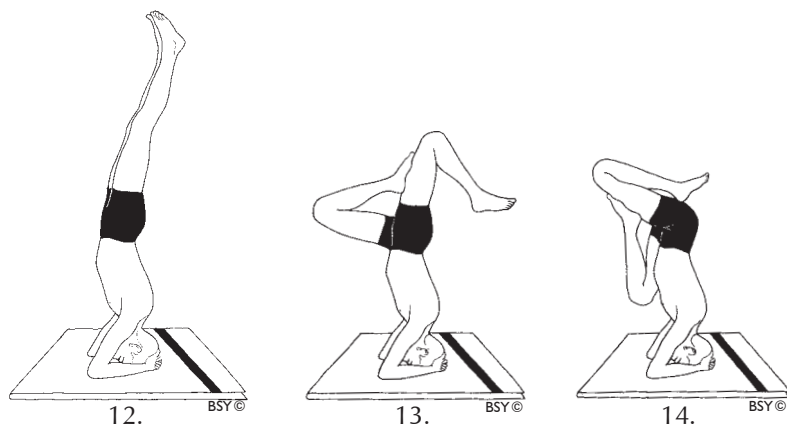
ADDITIONAL INVERTED ASANAS

1. Bhumi Pada Mastakasana (half headstand)
2. Moordhasana (crown-based pose)
3. Sarvangasana (shoulder stand pose) variation
4. Padma Sarvangasana (shoulder stand lotus pose)
5. Poorwa Halasana (preliminary plough pose)
6. Druta Halasana (dynamic plough pose)

7. Ardha Padma Halasana (half lotus plough pose)
8. Stambhan Asana (posture of retention)
9. Salamba Sirshasana (supported headstand pose)
10. Niralamba Sirshasana (unsupported headstand pose)
11. Oordhwa Padmasana (headstand lotus pose)
12. Kapali Asana (forehead supported pose)
13. Kapali Asana (forehead supported pose) Variation 1
14. Kapali Asana (forehead supported pose) Variation 2







BALANCING ASANAS

What are the effects of balancing asanas on the brain?

Swami Satyananda: Balancing asanas develop the functions of the cerebellum, the brain centre that controls how the body works in motion. It is located at the back of the head behind the top of the spine. All asanas help to develop and harmonize this centre by encouraging control of body movements; that is, to practise asanas it is necessary to develop a greater degree of muscular control. Balancing asanas, however, have a direct influence on the cerebellum, as their practice requires a good sense of balance and coordination.

Most people are uncoordinated in their movements, so their bodies constantly have to compensate for their lack of balance in order to avoid falling or knocking things over. This expends maximum effort and energy for minimum results, creating considerable additional strain. Such people will definitely benefit from this series, as improvement in the functioning of the cerebellum results in improved coordination and health in the whole body. All the different functions of the body are harmonized, enabling them to work together instead of against each other. People with diseases of the cerebellum, however, should not attempt these asanas.

Balancing asanas improve muscle coordination and posture, inducing physical and nervous balance, and stilling unconscious movement. This conserves energy and brings grace and fluidity of motion.

What is the effect of balancing asanas on the mind?

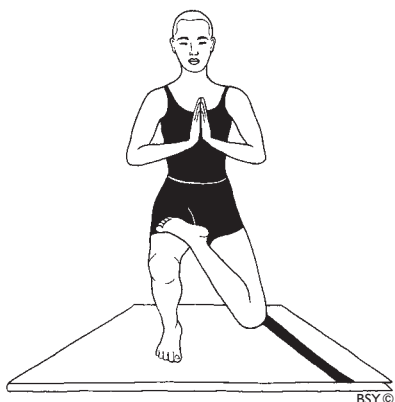
Swami Satyananda: The balancing asanas induce mental stability. To maintain equilibrium in the final pose, mental concentration is necessary. One's whole attention must be directed towards maintaining physical balance, which helps to remove stress and nervousness and to bring about a state of mental equanimity. When the mind is well integrated, there is perfect control and coordination of the muscles and movements of the body.

The focus required to perform these asanas with steadiness develops concentration and balance at the emotional, mental and psychic levels, removing stress and anxiety. For relief of excessive tension these practices should be held for as long as is comfortable. To steady the mind, practise concentration on one point, at eye or navel level, on the ground, or as indicated in the individual asana – this allows the body to maintain seemingly difficult positions for long periods of time.

VATAYANASANA: FLYING HORSE POSE

What is the meaning and significance of vatayanasana?

Swami Satyananda: The word *vata* means 'air' and *yana* means 'a vehicle'. Literally, the asana can be translated as 'the airborne vehicle pose'. However, the composite word *vatayana* has another meaning: 'a flying horse' or 'a horse that moves like the wind'. Specifically it is the name of a flying horse that is a part of Indian mythology. The equivalent in Western and Greek myths is Pegasus, the winged horse. Therefore, vatayanasana can be translated as 'the flying horse pose', 'winged horse pose' or 'the galloping horse pose'.



One may ask: “Why this name? The pose does not look like a horse nor does it help one to fly.” The answer comes with experience of the asana for oneself. It is very difficult to raise the body using the muscles of only one leg. The arms have to be used both to provide balance and to give extra upward momentum. The arms are held sideways like

wings and used to help raise the body to the standing position in the same way that Pegasus raises itself with its large wings.

When observing someone else, with a little help from the imagination it can be seen that the two legs in the final pose do slightly resemble the legs of a horse in profile. The name *vatayanasana* is actually a fitting description of the asana.

How is *vatayanasana* described in classical hatha yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: The asana identified by Sage Gheranda as *vrikshasana* is now commonly known as *vatayanasana*, flying horse pose. It is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:36):

*Vaamorumooladeshe cha yaamyam paadam nidhaaya vai;
Tishthettu vrikshavadbhoomau vrikshaasanamidam viduh.*

Place the right foot at the root of the left thigh and stand straight on the ground like a tree. This is called *vrikshasana*.

What are the benefits of *vatayanasana*?

Swami Niranjanananda: This asana is practised to achieve a heightened sense of balance, strengthen leg muscles and the abdominal region. It reduces hyperactivity of the kidneys and diuresis. It develops the ability to retain seminal fluid for the maintenance of *brahmacharya*. Whilst maintaining physical balance, the mind is focused on *anahata chakra*.

UTKATASANA: POSE FOR DIFFICULTIES

What is the meaning of utkatasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Utkat* means difficulty, strength or intensity. This asana was named utkatasana because readiness to respond to a situation is displayed in this posture. During anxious moments one may sit like this in order to be able to get up immediately when required.

Utkatasana is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:28)



Angushthaabhyamavashtabhyam dharaam gulphau cha khe gatau;

Tatropari gudam nyasya vijneyam tootkataasanam.

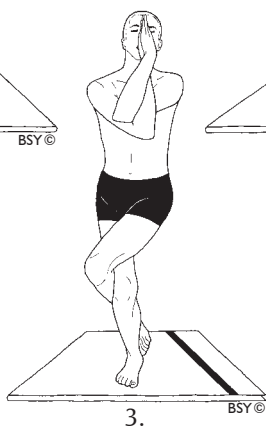
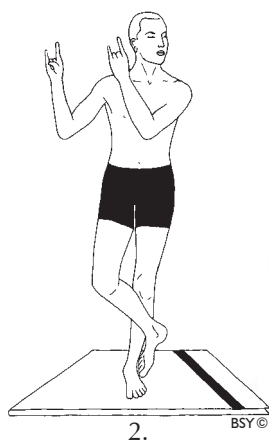
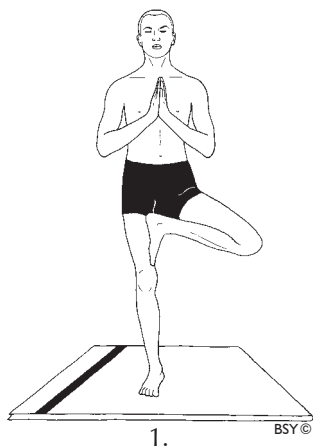
Keeping the big toes of the feet on the floor, sit with their support without letting the heels touch the floor and place the anal region on the heels. This will be known as utkatasana.

A variation of utkatasana is used in the strengthening practice of nauli.

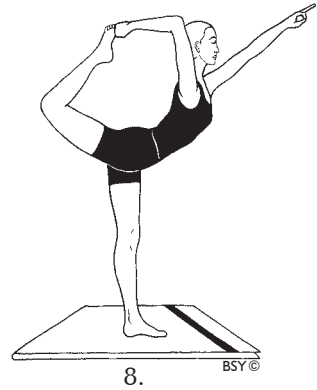
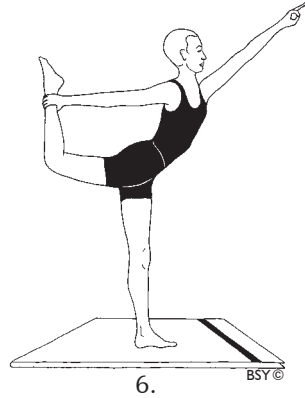
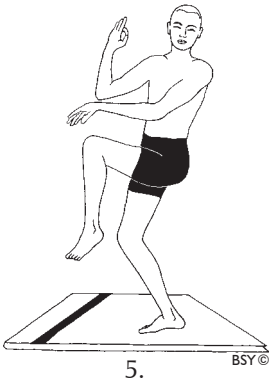
ADDITIONAL BALANCING ASANAS

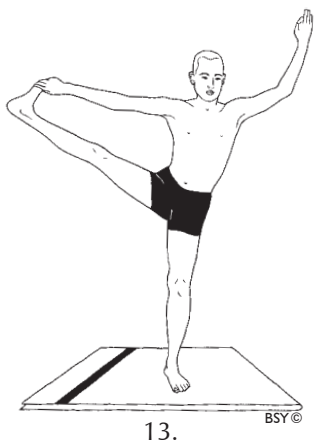
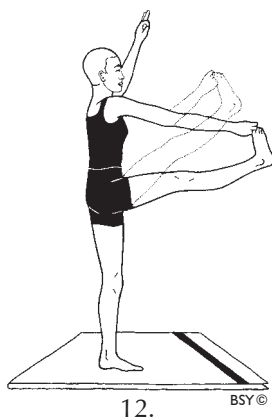
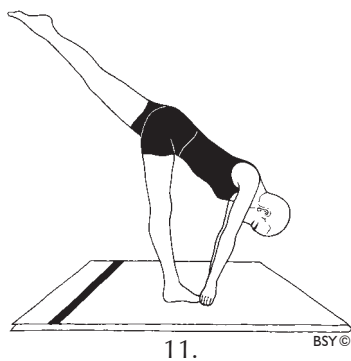
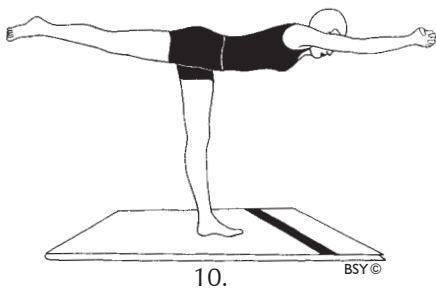
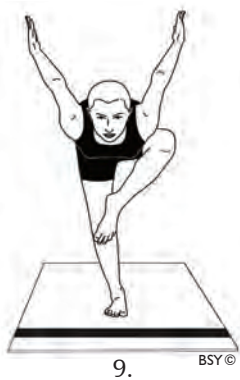
1. Eka Pada Pranamasana (one-legged prayer pose)
2. Natavarasana (Lord Krishna's pose)
3. Garudasana (eagle pose)
4. Garudasana (eagle pose) Variation
5. Tandavasana (Lord Shiva's dance)
6. Saral Natarajasana (preparatory Lord Shiva's pose)
7. Saral Natarajasana (preparatory Lord Shiva's pose) Variation
8. Natarajasana (Lord Shiva's pose)
9. Jal Kukkutasana (water bird pose)

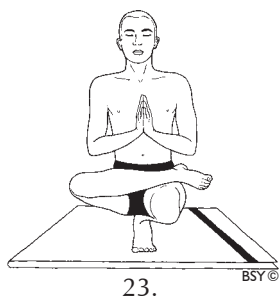
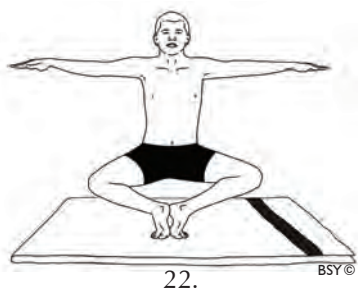
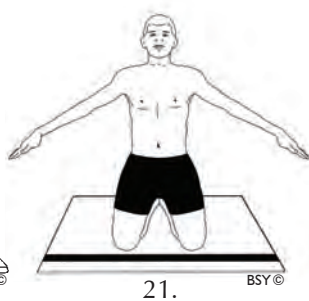
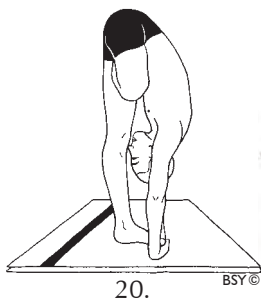
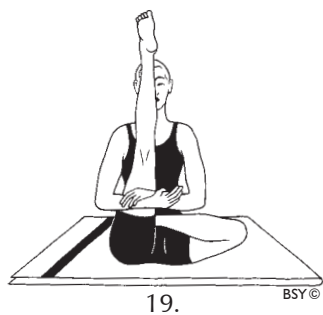
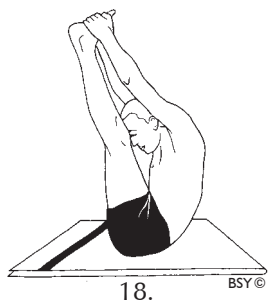
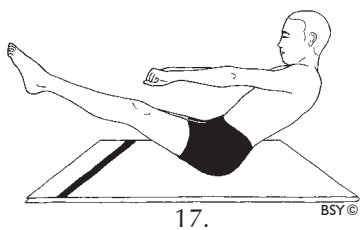
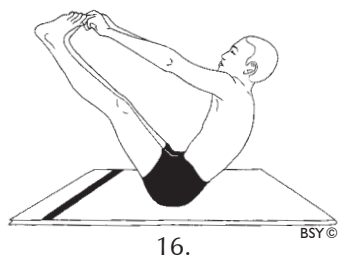
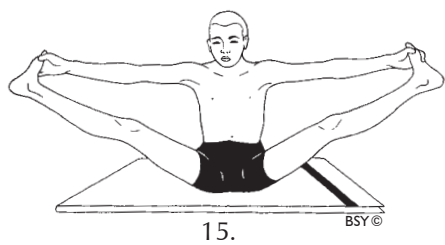
10. Eka Padasana (one foot pose)
11. Bakasana (crane pose)
12. Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana (raised hand to big toe pose)
13. Utthita Hasta Padangusthasana (raised hand to big toe pose) Variation
14. Utthita Eka Pada Paschimottanasana (raised one leg spinal stretch pose)
15. Merudandasana (spinal column pose)
16. Utthita Hasta Merudandasana (raised hand and spine pose)
17. Mukta Hasta Merudandasana (rocking horse)
18. Nirālamba Paschimottanasana (unsupported back stretching pose)
19. Ardha Padma Padottanasana (half lotus leg stretch pose)
20. Ardha Baddha Padmottanasana (half lotus forward bending)

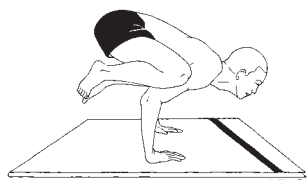


21. Samarpan Asana (pose of surrender)
22. Dwi Pada Angushthasana (double toe balancing pose)
23. Pada Angushthasana (tiptoe pose)
24. Baka Dhyanasana (patient crane pose)
25. Eka Pada Baka Dhyanasana (one-legged crane pose)
26. Dwi Hasta Bhujasana (two hands and arms pose)
27. Eka Hasta Bhujasana (single hand and arm pose)
28. Hamsasana (swan pose)
29. Santolanasana (balancing pose)
30. Santolanasana (balancing pose) Variation 1
31. Santolanasana (balancing pose) Variation 2
32. Vasishthasana (Sage Vasishtha's pose)



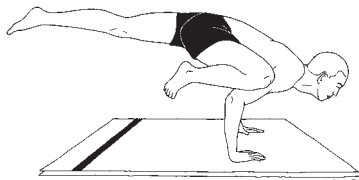






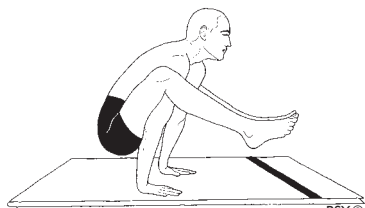
24.

BSY ©



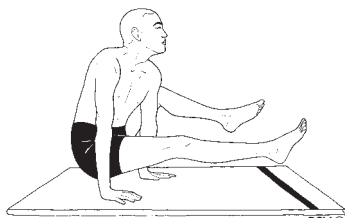
25.

BSY ©



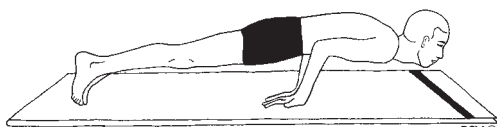
26.

BSY ©



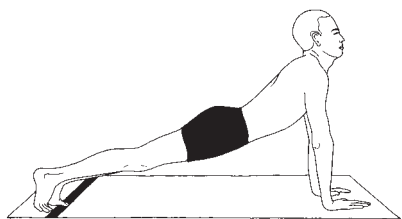
27.

BSY ©



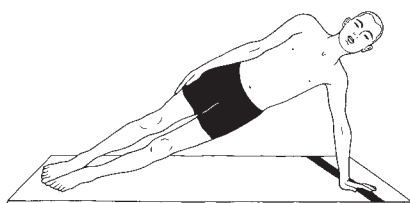
28.

BSY ©



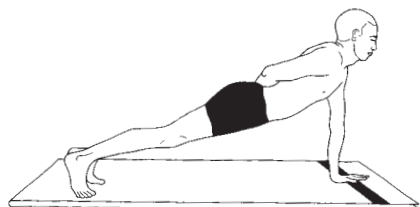
29.

BSY ©



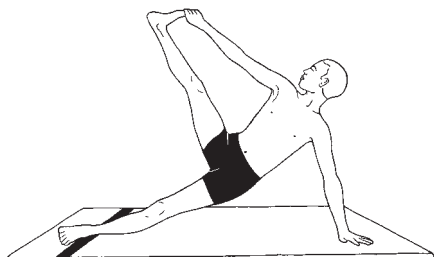
30.

BSY ©



31.

BSY ©



32.

BSY ©

PADMASANA GROUP OF ASANAS

What is the purpose of the padmasana group of asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Padmasana is traditionally regarded as one of the best postures for pranayama and pratyahara as it allows the body to be held completely steady for long periods of time. As the body is steadied, the mind becomes calm and gives a firm foundation for concentration. Padmasana directs the flow of prana from mooladhara chakra in the perineum to sahasrara at the crown of the head, heightening the experience of meditation.

The asanas in the padmasana group are performed whilst practising padmasana. They clear physical, emotional and mental blocks, help awaken the energy centres of the body and induce tranquillity. They increase the ability to sit in padmasana for extended periods of time as required for advanced meditation practices, but should only be practised by people who can already sit in padmasana without the slightest difficulty or strain.

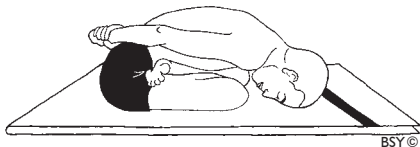


What precautions apply to the padmasana group?

Swami Satyananda: Those who suffer from sciatica or weak or injured knees should not perform these asanas until flexibility of the knees has been developed through practice of the pre-meditation asanas. Padmasana is not advisable during pregnancy as the circulation in the legs is reduced. The contra-indications given for individual asanas should also be closely observed.

Note: Information on padmasana itself is included in Chapter 7: Meditation Asanas

YOGAMUDRASANA: PSYCHIC UNION POSE



What is the meaning and significance of yogamudrasana?

Swami Satyananda: The Sanskrit word *yoga* means ‘union’ and a *mudra* is a mental or physical expression of an inner feeling or attitude. It is not only an expression of a feeling, but it is also a means, if properly used, of invoking inner power and realization. This asana is so called as it is said to unite the practitioner with his inner being.

In English this asana is usually called the ‘symbol of yoga’ or the ‘psychic union pose’. There are inadequate translations, for the two words ‘yoga mudrasana’ convey far more and have vast implications.

What are the benefits of yogamudrasana?

Swami Satyananda: Yogamudrasana is particularly useful for massaging the abdominal organs and helping to remove various associated ailments. The upturned heels apply pressure to the inner organs.

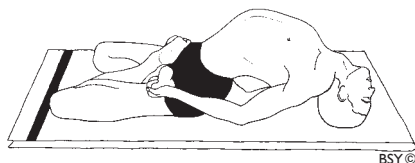
The blood flow to the legs is reduced and thereby diverted to the abdominal and pelvic region, contributing to the functioning of the associated organs.

During the practice the individual vertebrae are separated. This helps to release pressure on the spinal nerves as well as giving them a profound stretch and massage. These nerves connect the entire body to the brain and their improved health and functioning has beneficial repercussions throughout the body.

The legs are not stretched as in other forward bending asanas but the articulation of the joints is loosened. With regular practise this enables one to sit in padmasana for many hours.

Yogamudrasana is most useful for relaxing the whole mind and body. As such it is an excellent prelude to meditative practices.

MATSYASANA: FISH POSE



What is the meaning of matsyasana?

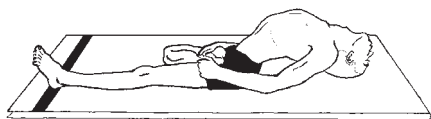
Swami Satyananda: *Matsya* means fish. The way of folding the legs in matsyasana resembles the tail of a fish, while the rest of the body represents its body and head. There is another reason why matsyasana is called the fish pose: it is an excellent position for floating in water for prolonged periods of time. Matsyasana is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:22):

*Muktapadmaasanam kritvaa uttaanashayanam charet;
Koorparaabhyam shiro veshtyam rogaghnam maatsyamaasanam.*

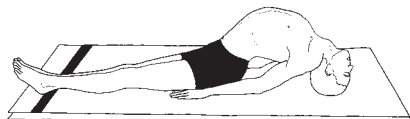
In the position of mukta padmasana bring the elbows of both hands around the head and lie flat on the floor. This destroyer of diseases is called matsyasana.

When should the variations of matsyasana be used?

Swami Satyananda: In order to do the classical pose one must be able to sit in padmasana. If one cannot sit in padmasana then either of the variations can be used. The aim should be to eventually master the classical pose, but until this stage, the vast benefits can be reaped, although at a lower level, by



Variation 1



Variation 2

practising the simpler variations. In the first variation the legs are in *ardha padmasana*, the half-lotus pose, and in the second variation, both legs are kept straight.

What is the best sequence for practising matsyasana?

Swami Satyananda: Halasana, vipareeta karani asana or sarvangasana are the ideal counterposes for matsyasana as they stretch the neck in the opposite direction, releasing any muscular tension.

Why is matsyasana practised after sarvangasana?

Swami Sivananda: Matsyasana should be practised soon after sarvangasana. It relieves any stiffness of the neck and any crampy condition of the cervical region caused by long practice of sarvangasana. It gives a natural massage, as it were, to the congested parts of the neck and shoulders, and maximizes the benefits of sarvangasana; it supplements sarvangasana.

What are the benefits of matsyasana?

Swami Satyananda: Matsyasana gives an excellent massage to the abdominal organs, thereby helping to alleviate various digestive disorders.

The accentuated stretch to the ribcage and lungs improves the breathing process by allowing the chest to expand to full capacity during respiration. It is therefore a good asana for those who suffer from asthma, bronchitis or other lung ailments.

Matsyasana loosens up the whole spine and removes any tendency towards round shoulders. The associated nerve connections and blood supply are rendered more efficient. The nerves in the neck and the thyroid gland are particularly influenced.

The pelvic region is also given a good stretch; this asana is therefore useful for women in preventing or removing various forms of sexual malfunctions. The pressure of the legs on the thighs greatly reduces the blood circulation in the legs; the femoral arteries are compressed. The blood flow

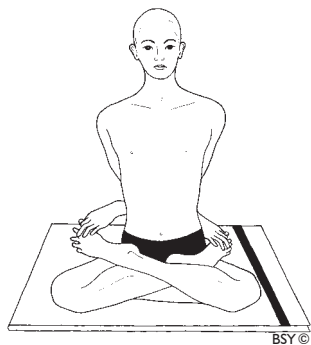
is diverted to the pelvic organs including the sexual glands (testes and prostate in males and ovaries in females), which helps to revitalize these organs and eliminate various types of associated ailments. Youthfulness and vitality are also closely related to the testes and ovaries – matsyasana therefore helps to bring about these desirable attributes.

It is also a useful asana for loosening up the legs in preparation for sitting in meditation postures.

BADDHA PADMASANA: LOCKED LOTUS POSE

How can the maximum benefit be derived from practising baddha padmasana?

Swami Sivananda: This is not an asana for meditation. It is chiefly intended for improving the health, vigour and vitality of the body to a considerable degree. The benefits of padmasana are derived from this asana to an enormous extent. It must be practised regularly for at least six months; only then can its maximum advantages be realized. Full benefits cannot be expected by merely sitting for a couple of minutes; it must be practised for at least half an hour. If baddha padmasana can be practised for an hour or an hour and a half, immense benefit will doubtless be derived. There are persons who do this asana for a full three hours: how tenacious and patient these people are! They keep wonderful health and vigour and a high standard of vitality.



What are the health benefits of baddha padmasana?

Swami Sivananda: Many diseases are cured by baddha padmasana. Chronic diseases of the stomach, liver, spleen and intestines that are pronounced incurable by allopaths and Ayurvedic practitioners are cured by a steady practice of this asana. There is no doubt about this.

Diseases of the stomach such as chronic gastritis, dyspepsia, flatulence, colic, dysentery, constipation, acidity, belching, and chronic lumbago are removed. As it keeps the spinal column erect, hunchback is removed. The nerves of the hips, waist, feet and legs are purified. Enlargement of the spleen and liver is cured. Torpidity of liver disappears.

Baddha padmasana exercises a potent influence over the surya chakra behind the navel and stimulates it; a great deal of energy is drawn upward.

How can baddha padmasana be used to help maintain brahmacharya?

Swami Sivananda: While in the asana, draw the belly backwards and upwards. Repeat *Om* or *Ram* mentally. Imagine that the seminal energy flows towards the brain for being stored as ojas shakti. Do this special practice for ten minutes daily. This process is a great help for maintaining brahmacharya.

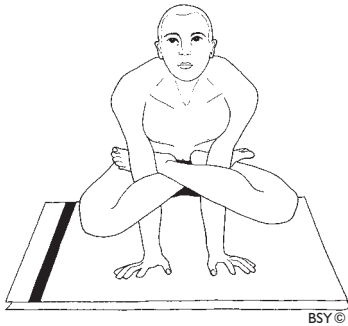
KUKKUTASANA: COCKEREL POSE

What is the meaning of kukkutasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: *Kukkut* means a cock or cockerel. In this asana the physical posture is similar to that of a cockerel. That is why it is called kukkutasana. It is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:31):

*Padmaasanam samaasaadya
jaanoorvorantare karau;*

*Koorparaabhyaam samaaseeno
uchchasthah kukkutaasanam.*



BSY ©

Sit in padmasana. Insert the hands between the thighs and calves and place them on the floor. Placing the palms of the hands firmly on the floor, raise the body from the floor. The body will be supported on the elbows. It is called kukkutasana.

What are the spiritual effects of kukkutasana?

Swami Satyananda: Kukkutasana is known as the cockerel pose, as the shape of the body resembles a cockerel. It is described in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:23):

*Padmaasanam tu samsthaapya jaanoorvorantare karau.
Niveshya bhoomau samsthaapya vyomastham kukkutaasanam.*

Assuming padmasana, insert the hands between the thighs and calves, planting them (the hands) firmly on the ground, raise the body in the air. This is kukkutasana.

Kukkutasana is said to be useful in the process of awakening kundalini. It strengthens the arm and shoulder muscles and gives the sensation of levitation. Normally the body weight is on the legs and feet, but in this asana it is altered and, causing the energies of the body to flow in a different direction.

Kukkutasana strengthens the arm and shoulder muscles and stretches the chest. It loosens the legs and develops a sense of balance and stability. It helps to awaken kundalini due to the stimulation of mooladhara chakra. Some people can raise their body up to armpit level. It is especially beneficial for alleviation of diseases affecting the shoulders, arms, chest, lungs and heart. Keep awareness focused on the breath in the nostrils or on maintaining balance. The point of concentration in this asana is mooladhara chakra.

What is the relationship between breath awareness and mooladhara in kukkutasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: In this practice there must be awareness of the breath. Initially there is a tendency to hold the breath while pushing down and straightening the arms in order to support the body weight. However, once the final position is reached, there has to be an effort to maintain the stability of the body and concentration should be on the inhalation and exhalation. The breathing process is to be observed in the nasal passages.

As one moves into the final posture there is an automatic contraction of the perineum. This is an aspect one should try to increasingly develop in kukkutasana. With contraction of the perineum, the *medhra*, or nadi complex, situated midway between mooladhara and swadhisthana chakras, is stimulated. Yogis have mentioned that the medhra is where the seventy-two thousand nadis, or conductors of prana, emanate and spread throughout the system. Initially one can also practise moola bandha while going into kukkutasana.

In the final position of kukkutasana, moola bandha is performed along with awareness of the breath in the nostrils. The nosetip, *nasikagra*, is the switch of mooladhara. Concentration on the breath has the function of stimulating the nasikagra centre. With concentration on nasikagra, along with contraction of the medhra, this pose becomes a powerful tool for awakening both mooladhara and swadhisthana chakras, and for removing any kind of pranic blockage which may exist there prior to the awakening of kundalini.

What is the effect of focusing energy into mooladhara by practising kukkutasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: It is interesting to note that kukkutasana strengthens the earth element in mooladhara chakra, creating a sense of stability. The paradox here is that mooladhara is raised off the ground, yet the earth element is strengthened. This is due to the awakening of mooladhara.

UTTHAN KOORMASANA: STRETCHING TORTOISE POSE

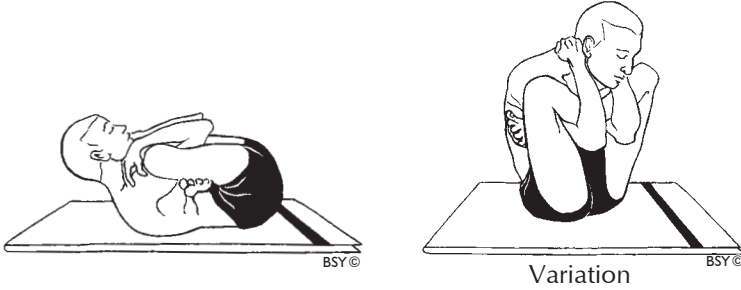
What is the difference between kukkutasana and utthan koormasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: The difference between kukkutasana and utthan koormasana is that in utthan koormasana instead of placing the palms of the hands on the floor and balancing

on them, the hands hold the shoulders or neck while the legs remains in the posture of padmasana. This posture is described in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:24):

*Kukkutaasanabandhastho dorbhyaam sambadhya kandharaam.
Bhavetkoormavaduttaana etaduttaanakoormakam.*

Sitting in kukkutasana, join both the hands at the shoulders and lie flat on the back like a tortoise. This is uttankoormasana.



Utthan koormasana can also be practised in a vertical position, balancing on the tail bone. This variation is usually known as *garbhasana*. It is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:33):

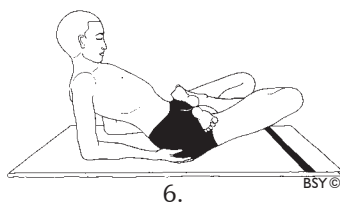
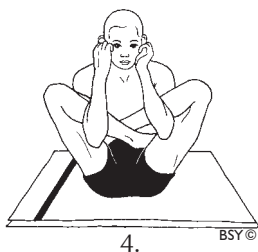
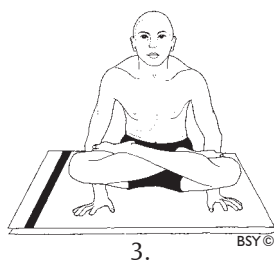
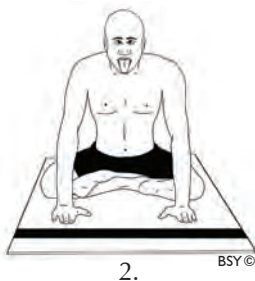
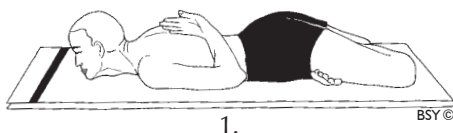
*Kukkutaasanabandhastham karaabhyaam dhritakandharam;
Peetham koormavaduttaanametaduttaanakoormakam.*

Practising kukkutasana, then holding the shoulders in both hands in kukkutasana and straightening the body like a tortoise is called utthan koormasana.

In this constricted position of the body, pressure is created on all the internal organs. Digestion is improved. This asana accelerates the circulation of fresh blood around the entire body. In particular, it is performed to remove stagnant blood from the muscles. Utthan koormasana induces calmness and is helpful for the management of anger and nervous disorders if it can be practised comfortably.

ADDITIONAL ASANAS FROM THE PADMASANA GROUP

1. Gupta Padmasana (hidden lotus pose)
2. Padmasinhagarjanasana (roaring lion lotus pose)
3. Lolasana (swinging pose)
4. Garbhasana (womb pose)
5. Garbhasana (womb pose) Variation
6. Tolangulasana (weighing scale pose)



6

Advanced Asanas

PURPOSE

Why are advanced asanas practised?

Swami Satyananda: Yogasana is the means to siddhi. To advance it is necessary to reduce a few routine asanas and practice difficult ones. New asanas appear difficult for some time, but as one goes on practising them, they become easy. Vrischika, kandapada, yogamudra, utkat etc., are peculiar asanas.

What is the role of advanced asanas in hatha yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: The advanced asanas were incorporated into hatha yoga in order to provide greater awareness of physical balance, coordination and harmony. The number of practices varies from text to text, and from thinker to thinker, according to their own experience and understanding of the human body and personality.

When is a student ready to practise advanced asanas?

Swami Satyananda: The advanced asana group should not be attempted unless the body is highly flexible. The asanas in the beginners and intermediate groups must be mastered before trying to perform any of these postures. While practising the advanced asanas it is essential to avoid straining the body in any way. These practices require the limbs and joints to move

into unusual positions to which they are not habituated. Any strain may damage them. Gently coaxing the body to perform advanced asanas over a period of time is far better than trying to achieve quick results through force.

Are the advanced asanas therapeutic?

Swami Satyananda: Generally speaking, these asanas are designed to further improve the health of a person who is already very healthy. They are not designed for therapeutic purposes. They are not recommended during pregnancy. The contra-indications given for the individual asanas must be carefully observed.

How can advanced asanas lead to personality transformation?

Swami Satyananda: These asanas strongly affect the energy of the body. The chakras and associated physical, mental, emotional and psychic dimensions of the personality are stimulated and harmonized, contributing to positive transformation in one's character.

When do mudra and bandha become part of asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: The advanced asanas in hatha yoga are those asanas in which the body automatically triggers a particular bandha or mudra. One example is brahmacharyasana, where there is an automatic contraction of the perineal muscle, and therefore moola bandha automatically occurs.

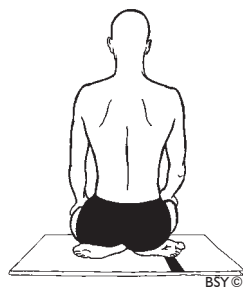
KOORMASANA: TORTOISE POSE

What is koormasana?

Swami Satyananda: The description of *koormasana*, tortoise pose, varies according to different texts. This particular asana is called *koorma*, as the shape of the body resembles that of a tortoise. *Koormasana* is described in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:22):

*Gudam nirudhya gutaphaabhyaam
vyutkramena samaahitah.
Koormasana bhavedetaditi yogavido
viduh.*

Press the anus firmly with the ankles in the opposite direction and sit well-poised. According to the yogis this is koormasana.



The description sounds simple but one has to practise it carefully and the feet have to be sufficiently supple.

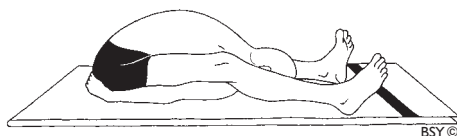
What are the different ways of practising koormasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Koorma means tortoise. It will be noticed that only the hands and feet of a tortoise protrude from its shell. Koormasana is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:32):

*Gulphau cha vrishanasyaadho vyutkramena samaahitau;
Rijukaayashirogreevam koormasana miteeritam.*

Placing both heels underneath the testes in opposite directions and sitting with the body, head and neck straight and in line, is called koormasana.

The technique of koormasana as described by Sage Gheranda is quite different from the normal koormasana variation practised today, where the curve of the back as it bends forward shapes the body like that of a tortoise.



Flexibility is required only for bending forward from the hips, as the body is then locked in the final position, with the legs stretched forward and the hands behind the buttocks. This asana resembles a tortoise in the final position, the back

of the body representing the shell and the arms and legs the four limbs.

Which asanas are suitable counterposes for koormasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Koormasana should be followed with, or preceded by, a backward bending asana such as bhujangasana, matsyasana or supta vajrasana. Poorna dhanurasana is the perfect counterpose for koormasana.

What are the general benefits of practising koormasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Koormasana tones all the organs of the abdomen and is helpful in managing diabetes, flatulence and constipation. It increases flexibility and circulation in the spine, soothing the nerves and relieving head and neck ache.

It is an excellent asana for focusing the mind by maintaining awareness of the normal breath. Koormasana is most useful for controlling anger, but as it is difficult, shashankasana, which has similar benefits, is widely recommended. It is said that this asana strengthens the nervous system.

What are the effects of koormasana on the nadis?

Swami Satyananda: The heels press the anus close to the vajra nadi and prevent energy from escaping. Thus it is useful for both celibates and householders. It channels the sexual energy to higher centres in the body and regulates the sex glands, reproductive and excretory organs. Important nadis in the sides of the feet, which connect to the kidneys and other visceral organs, are pressed and thereby receive gentle stimulation. Those people suffering from lack of energy, sexual and urinary disorders can practise koormasana to help rectify these problems. However, unless the feet are supple it will be difficult to sit on them comfortably.

What are the spiritual effects of koormasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Koormasana is practised for mental relaxation and introversion and induces a sense of

composure, inner security and surrender. The effects of pleasure and pain are removed. Passion and fear subside, leaving the body and mind refreshed. Koormasana prepares the spiritual aspirant for the fifth stage of yogic practice, *pratyahara*, sense withdrawal, which is symbolized by the tortoise. It is stated in the *Bhagavad Gita* (2:58):

*Yadaa samharate chaayam koormo'ngaaneeva sarvashah.
Indriyaaneendriyaarthebhyastasya prajnaa pratishthitaa.*

When one can withdraw the senses from association with other objects, as a tortoise withdraws its limbs from external danger, then one is firmly fixed on the path towards wisdom.

For spiritual purposes the point of concentration while holding koormasana is swadhithana or manipura chakra. For general purposes the pose can be held for up to three minutes, while for spiritual purposes it is held for longer durations.

How does koormasana help awaken sushumna nadi?

Swami Niranjanananda: The hatha yoga texts state that this posture awakens sushumna. In the Satyananda tradition koormasana is an advanced forward bending posture requiring greater flexibility of both the hips and shoulders than other forward bends. The need here is not to bend the spine but rather to develop flexibility in the pelvis. The back should be kept straight while bending forward, working the pelvis until finally one is able to place the chest on the floor.

Koormasana places a profound stretch along the coverings of the spinal canal, the meninges, which ascend into the brain. This means that in this posture one is almost able to stretch inside the brain through these spinal coverings. Stretching the spine has profound effects on all the internal functions. Forward bending massages and compresses all the internal organs from the pelvic organs to the digestive organs and diaphragm, then the lungs.

What is the effect of flattening the front of the body against the floor in koormasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: In this posture the relationship between oneself and the earth is enhanced. Opening oneself up to the earth and coming into contact with the earth has a tremendous effect on the whole neurological and psychophysiological functioning. Different asanas have different effects, depending upon the direction in which one is sitting in relation to gravity, whether the spine is upright, forward, flexed, extended or inverted. By placing the front of the body onto the earth, a sense of inner psychological change is created, a sense of indwelling and security.

This posture also increases proprioceptive awareness and gives an understanding of the difference between the back and the front of the body. In the final position, there is a complete extension of every ligament and nerve along the back of the body. The arms are stretched, the legs are pressing the tops of the shoulders, the head is pushed down to the floor, and the whole spine is stretched out in all directions. It is not just one movement of the spine, as in other postures which bend forward or backwards. Here the whole spine seems to extend in all directions.

What is the effect of koormasana on the granthis?

Swami Niranjanananda: The perineum and forehead are pressed against the floor in this posture, directly stimulating mooladhara and ajna chakras, which helps to awaken sushumna nadi within the spine. Yogis use this practice to stimulate the nerve plexuses along the spine as it creates a change in the blood circulation and removes what is known in yoga as 'nadi knots'.

These are knots within the nadis, adhesions within the veins, arteries and ligaments that cause stiffness, tightness and blockages. After performing this posture, the body will feel light when it goes into shavasana. There will be a sensation of expansion as if one is floating. The whole back will feel flat. The removal of blocks and the opening up of the three major

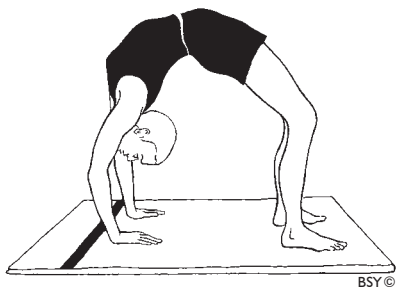
psychic knots of yoga: *rudra*, *vishnu* and *brahma granthis*, or the three major diaphragms, takes place in this posture.

CHAKRASANA: WHEEL POSE

Who is chakrasana suitable for?

Swami Sivananda: Many acrobats demonstrate this asana in the streets. It resembles a circle. Hence the significant name, 'chakrasana'. In fact, it resembles a bow more than a circle. Young children can do it very easily because their spines are very elastic. When the bones become rigid and ossified in advanced years, bending of the spine becomes difficult.

There is another way of doing chakrasana which is suitable for older people. There is no danger of falling. One must lie down on the back. Those with a rigid spine can form a semicircle at the outset. In the course of time all the rigid parts become elastic. When one raises oneself into this asana the body will be light. One experiences exhilaration of spirit all at once. One feels ready for active work.



What are the general benefits of chakrasana?

Swami Sivananda: He who practises this will have perfect control of his body. He will be agile and nimble. He can turn out more work in a short space of time and all the parts of the body will be benefited by it. All the other benefits of *bhujangasana*, *shalabhasana* and *dhanurasana* are derived from chakrasana.

What is the effect of chakrasana on the nervous system and the pranic body?

Swami Niranjanananda: This position is the most powerful extension of the spine possible. It is also an inverted

position. The whole nervous system is in a position it would normally never have to deal with. This means the nervous system is actually being stretched, which is the whole purpose of chakrasana.

The body is constructed so that forward bending can easily be done, stretching the spine in one direction only. When extension or bending in the other direction takes place, each and every nerve, ligament and nadi is stretched. That stretch opens up the nadis which form a plexus at the different chakra areas. Therefore, in the Yoga Upanishads, chakrasana is used for opening or awakening the chakras.

When one breathes in this posture, certain habitual tensions are removed from the three major diaphragms of the body: the respiratory diaphragm, the perineum, and a third diaphragm under the brain. Furthermore, this posture integrates the upper and lower parts of the body, so that the legs and arms work in a way that they do not normally. This effect of connecting the upper and lower parts of the body allows one to feel the body as a more complete unit.

Why do many people find it difficult to raise the body into chakrasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Many people find it difficult to raise the body into chakrasana. Arm strengthening practices may help in raising the body but this is not primarily due to weakness in the arms, rather it happens because the nervous system is not ready to go into that pose. One's sense of position in space, which in physiological terms is called proprioception, is lost. One can know where one's arm is in space, but knowing where the body is in this position is difficult. Any position that arches the back, for example, kandharasana, grivasana or setu asana, is good for developing proprioceptive awareness.

POORNA MATSYENDRASANA: FULL SPINAL TWIST POSE

When is one ready to practice poorna matsyendrasana?

Swami Sivananda: Those who have practised *ardha matsyendrasana* for some time are ready for taking up the full pose. The full pose is a little more difficult than the half pose.

How can poorna matsyendrasana be developed?

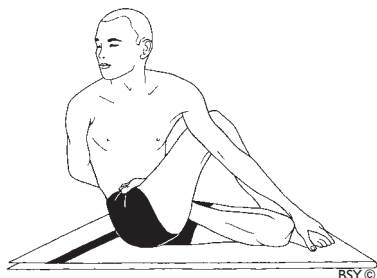
Swami Sivananda: The technique appears to be difficult. If one gives careful attention and thinks with concentration, it is very clear and easy. If it is difficult to keep one's balance, instead of bringing the hand towards the back, the palm can be kept on the floor. This gives good support and makes matters easier. Slowly the hand can be taken away and turned towards the back.

What are the benefits of poorna matsyendrasana?

Swami Sivananda: The advantages derived from *ardha matsyendrasana*, the half spinal twist pose, are derived to a greater extent from this full pose. The synovial fluid of the joints increases and the joints become very active. All the adhesions of the joints that are caused by rheumatism are removed.

It bestows beautiful health. It augments *prana shakti*, vigour and vitality, and consequently removes innumerable diseases. The pressure of the heel on the navel forces blood towards the back which nourishes all the nerves of the back, particularly the nadis of the back. It awakens the *kundalini* and brings peace of mind.

Hail, hail to Yogi Matsyendra who first introduced this asana amongst the hatha yoga students!



BSY ©

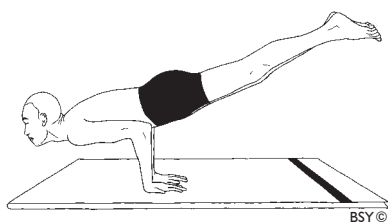
MAYURASANA: PEACOCK POSE

What is the meaning and significance of mayurasana?

Swami Satyananda: This asana has not only been given its name because the practitioner resembles a peacock, but also as the effects of its practice enable one to develop the characteristics of the peacock's digestive system. In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:31) it states:

*Harati sakalarogaanaashu gulmodaraadee-
nabhibhavati cha doshaanaasanam shreemayooram.
Bahu kadashanabhootam bhasma kuryaadashesham
janayati jatharaagnim jaarayetkaalakootam.*

Mayurasana quickly alleviates all diseases like enlargement of the glands, dropsy and other stomach disorders. It rectifies imbalance of the humours (vata, pitta, kapha). It reduces to ashes all food taken indiscriminately, kindles the gastric fire and enables destruction of kalakuta (a deadly poison).



The peacock has the remarkable ability to eat poisonous substances and digest them completely without adverse effects. In fact, the peacock prefers to eat poisonous snakes, poisonous insects,

reptiles and scorpions. The peacock's digestive system must be extremely strong, secreting ample digestive juices and having very efficient elimination. Practice of mayurasana promotes digestion and elimination of toxins so that poisonous substances are not circulated or stored.

How can a practitioner prepare the body for the practice of mayurasana?

Swami Satyananda: It is advisable to make the diet pure before commencing mayurasana. As this asana eliminates

the build up of toxic materials, the cleansing process will be much more effective if the diet is pure to start with or if laghoo shankhaprakshalana is practised.

Foods which produce a lot of toxins, such as meat, alcohol and pungent spices, are regarded as poisons. Pure food cleans the system, such as grains, cereals, pulses, vegetables, fruit, and spices like turmeric. A simple vegetarian diet maintains a toxin-free system, but if one is forced by social conditions to take toxic foods, mayurasana will maintain the system.

People suffering from peptic ulcers, hernia, heart disease, high blood pressure, brain tumours or ear, eye or nose infections must cure their condition before attempting mayurasana.

What qualities must one have in order to practise mayurasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Mayurasana can only be performed by those who already have flexibility, physical self-control and balance. This pose should not be attempted if there is any sign of illness or physical weakness, even if it is a wind disorder. This is an important point. If this asana is practised when there is any disease or wind disorder, wind may rise upward, and as retention of the breath is practised in this asana, wind can be retained in the chest, possibly causing pain.

It is recommended that mayurasana be used primarily by those who are already fit and healthy to increase strength, purity and balance. It is a difficult asana, requiring mental balance and physical strength. Mayurasana is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:30):

Paanyostalaabhyamavalambya bhoomim tatkoorparasthaapitan-aabhipaarshvam;

Uchchaasano dandavadutthitah khe maayoorametatpravadanti peetham.

Keeping the palms of both hands firmly on the floor, place both elbows to the rear on each side of the navel. Then raise

both the legs and body like a stick (horizontal). This is called mayurasana.

Is mayurasana suitable for women?

Swami Niranjanananda: Women have a different muscular system from men in the abdomen and chest areas. They may find mayurasana difficult to perform. Pregnant women are advised not to practise this posture.

How can purification of the body be maximized using mayurasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: People who are advised to speed up the purification processes of the body and eliminate toxins should prepare for mayurasana by observing the following instructions. Eliminate milk products, meat, fat, spices, adulterated foods and any other foods which are difficult to digest from the diet. For one month take fruit, vegetables, rice, whole wheat chapattis or bread, buttermilk and other simple foods which are easy to digest. After two weeks of this restricted diet, begin to practise mayurasana. Within a month the entire system should be purified, both internally and externally.

What are the most important characteristics of mayurasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Mayurasana develops the strength of the whole body and the integration of the nervous system, but it is basically a balancing pose. The trick is to find the centre of balance, bringing the elbows to a point just below the navel so that the strength of the arms is not actually needed much, although, of course, strength is required, especially in the wrists and shoulders. After raising the body into the final position it is more a question of balance than strength. When this point of balance is found, the body is gently tensed but in perfect alignment. When the body is aligned in this posture, strength develops without strain. There is tension without strain, and this tension has a beneficial effect on the entire system.

From other points of view, mayurasana is considered to be an inverted posture. Blood is pushed down towards the brain, creating a temporary increase in blood pressure. Upon returning to the starting position, the blood pressure will normalize, or even go a little lower than before. Mayurasana strengthens the cardiovascular system. As a balancing pose, it has a powerful effect on the central nervous system. However, its major physical effect is on the abdominal organs, as it puts a tremendous amount of pressure on the abdominal cavity. It squeezes the liver, spleen, kidneys and digestive organs, and strengthens the solar plexus.

Why is mayurasana considered to be a major yogasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: In the Upanishads, mayurasana is considered to be a major posture for various reasons. The practice brings about elimination of toxins due to the awakening and stimulation of manipura and agni mandala, within the zone of samana vayu. When toxins accumulated in the body are burnt, the three doshas: *vata*, *kapha* and *pitta* (wind, mucus and bile), are brought into balance and harmony. Therefore, when the practice is performed for purification or for spiritual benefits, a sattwic diet is recommended in order to speed up the removal of toxins.

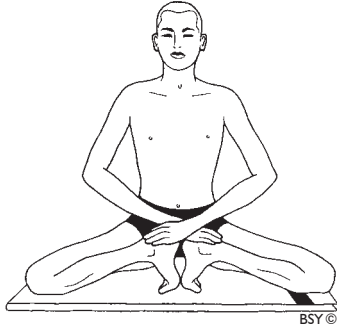
What is the power of mayurasana?

Swami Sivananda: Mayurasana has a charm of its own. It is very beautiful to look at. It braces one up quickly. It gives full exercise within a few seconds. This one asana can give maximum physical exercise in minimum time. It serves like a hypodermic injection of adrenalin or digitalin.

GORAKSHASANA: YOGI GORAKHNATH'S POSE

What is the purpose of gorakshasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: By practising this asana, control over the reproductive organs, sexual desire and discharge of semen is achieved. It makes the legs and feet extremely supple.



The process of concentration on the throat helps to eliminate many diseases. This asana is also practised in order to focus the mind and to achieve a state of concentration. This was the preferred meditation asana of the great yogi, Gorakhnath.

The flow of prana is reversed and directed upward to the higher centres for use in meditative states. In fact gorakshasana is a practice for meditation. When the eyes remain closed during the practice, meditation is on the symbol. The mind immediately becomes one-pointed, as the state of the body means that the mind does not waver at all. Similarly, if nasikagra drishti is practised, the mind is left with no alternative but to become focused on the nosetip, which stimulates mooladhara chakra.

Gorakshasana is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:25–26):

*Jaanoorvorantare paadau uttaanau vyaktasamsthitau;
Gulphau chaachchhaadya hastaabhyaamuttaanaabhyaam
prayatnatah.*

*Kanthasankochanam kritvaa naasaagramavalokayet;
Gorakshaasanamityaahuryoginaam siddhikaaranam.*

Keep the toes of both the feet in a hidden manner in the middle of both thighs and knees. Holding both heels with both hands, contract the throat and fix the gaze at the nosetip. This gorakshasana enables yogis to attain siddhi. (25–26)

VRISCHIKASANA: SCORPION POSE

What is the meaning and significance of vrischikasana?

Swami Satyananda: The word *vrischika* is Sanskrit for scorpion, hence the English translation is ‘scorpion pose’. This asana

is so called due to its resemblance to a scorpion with its tail arched above its back in preparation to strike a victim.

Vrischikasana is quite difficult to perform, requiring a highly developed sense of balance. In some respects, however, it is even more efficacious than sirshasana, since it duplicates all the benefits of sirshasana, together with other notable benefits. Its main drawback is that it is not easy to maintain for more than a short duration, so that the benefits it could give may not reach fruition.

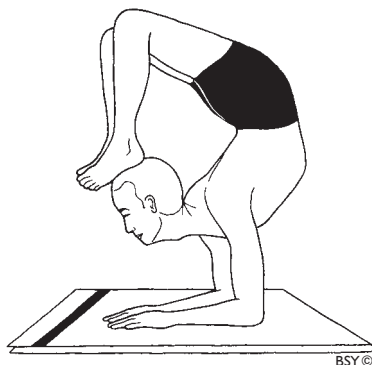
Due to the difficulty of practising vrischikasana, only people with supple spines, a good sense of balance and who can do sirshasana without the slightest problem, should perform or attempt to learn this asana.

Why is vrischikasana so beneficial?

Swami Satyananda: All the benefits of sirshasana are obtained from this asana. Additionally, superimposed on these effects are the benefits obtained from backward bending asanas, such as bhujangasana or dhanurasana.

What is the effect of vrischikasana on the spine?

Swami Satyananda: In vrischikasana the weight of the body is supported by the upper arms, not by the neck as in sirshasana; consequently the cervical vertebrae are completely relaxed. This disengages the individual vertebrae in this region from each other and releases all compression of the discs between adjoining vertebrae. This means that any pressure on the cranial nerves which emerge from the spinal cord in the spaces between the cervical vertebrae, is released. This produces a beneficial relaxation of these nerves, together with an unimpeded flow of blood to the brain, superior to that obtained during sirshasana.



The curvature of the whole spine produces suppleness and aids the drainage of blood in the back, which is normally rather sluggish. All the pairs of spinal nerves which exit from the spinal cord through the spaces between adjacent vertebrae, together with the two sympathetic nerve chains which run beside the vertebral column, embedded in the muscles surrounding the spine, receive a favourable stimulation during vrischikasana. Since these nerves have a widespread influence on the functioning of the body, the results of this stimulation can be a general, yet profound, improvement in physical health.

What are the effects of vrischikasana on the abdomen?

Swami Satyananda: The influences on the abdomen are essentially the same as for all inverted poses, but the accentuated curvature of the body in the abdominal region increases the internal pressure. This, together with the diaphragmatic motion, accentuates the abdominal massage. Further, though all the inverted poses encourage the drainage of stagnant blood from the abdominal organs, the increased intra-abdominal pressure experienced in vrischikasana further improves this expulsion of blood.

The general effect is improvement in the efficiency of the abdominal organs, removal of constipation, indigestion and other abdominal disorders. The normally inaccessible kidneys and suprarenal glands are compressed by the curvature of the back and stimulated by the motion of the diaphragm. This improves their functioning, enhancing the purification of blood and elimination of urine by the kidneys, and normalizing the action of the suprarenal glands. These glands influence a person's emotional state by the secretion of the hormone adrenalin.

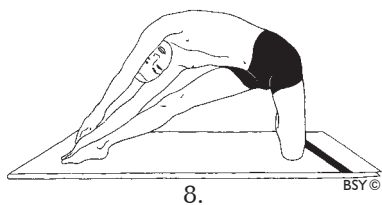
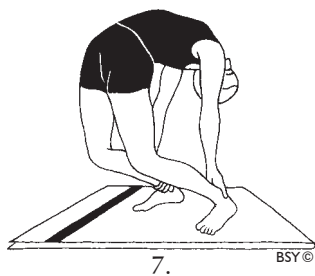
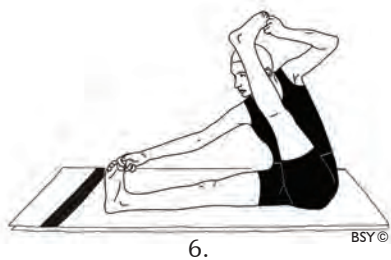
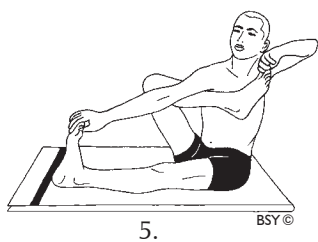
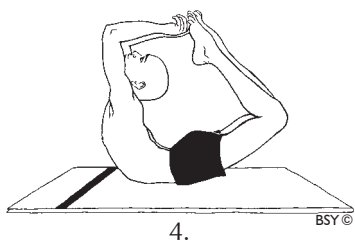
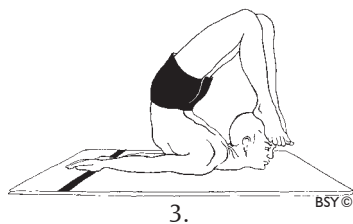
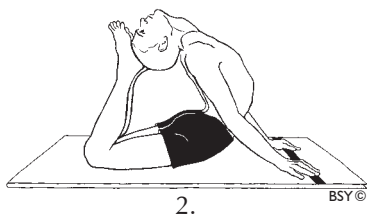
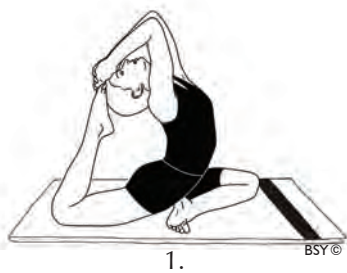
What is the effect of vrischikasana on the brain?

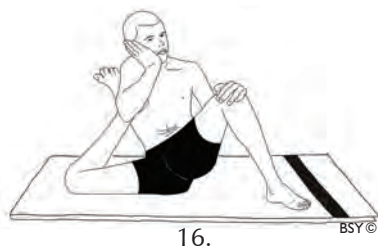
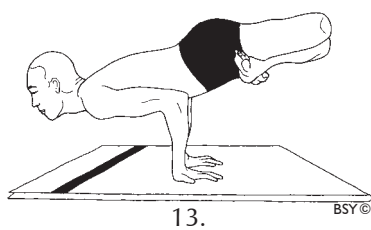
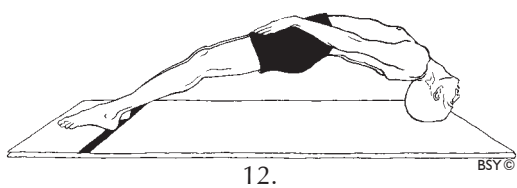
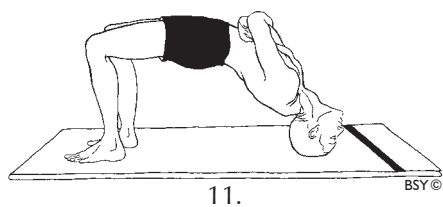
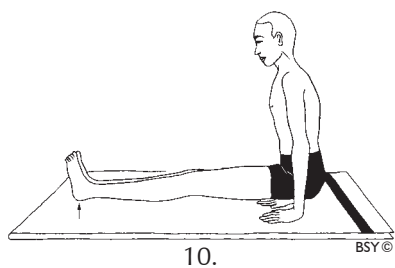
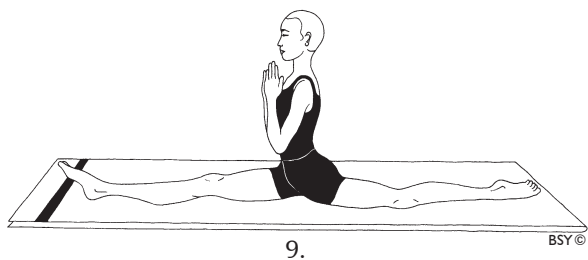
Swami Satyananda: Performing this asana requires a good sense of balance resulting in development of the cerebellum, the organ in the brain which coordinates and controls the

voluntary movements and postures of the body. Due to the inverted position this is accompanied by an enriched blood flow to this part of the brain. These effects simultaneously improve the functioning of the cerebellum.

ADDITIONAL ADVANCED ASANAS

1. Eka Pada Rajakapotasana (one leg royal pigeon pose)
2. Poorna Bhujangasana (full cobra pose)
3. Poorna Shalabhasana (full locust pose)
4. Poorna Dhanurasana (full bow pose)
5. Dhanurakarshanasana (archer's pose)
6. Dhanurakarshanasana (archer's pose) Variation
7. Prishthasana (back pose)
8. Parighasana (beam or cross-bar pose)
9. Hanumanasana (Hanuman's pose)
10. Brahmacharyasana (celibate's pose)
11. Grivasana (neck pose)
12. Sirshapada Bhumi Sparshasana (head and foot touching the ground pose)
13. Padma Mayurasana (lotus or bound peacock pose)
14. Kehunyoordhva Janu Asana (knee on elbow pose)
15. Niranjanasana (easy chair pose)
16. Niranjanasan (easy chair pose) Variation
17. Vikatasana (formidable pose)
18. Moolabandhasana (perineal contraction pose)
19. Astavakrasana (eight-twists pose)
20. Eka Pada Sirasana (one foot to head pose)
21. Utthan Eka Pada Sirasana (standing foot to head pose)
22. Dwi Pada Sirasana (two feet to head pose) Stage 1
23. Dwi Pada Sirasana (two feet to head pose) Stage 2
24. Dwi Pada Kandharasana (two-legged shoulder pose)
25. Padma Parvatasana (lotus mountain pose)
26. Padma Parvatasana (lotus mountain pose) Variation
27. Kashyapasana (Sage Kashyapa's pose)
28. Vishwamitrasana (Sage Vishwamitra's pose)

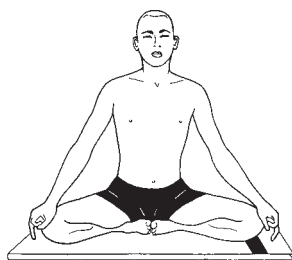






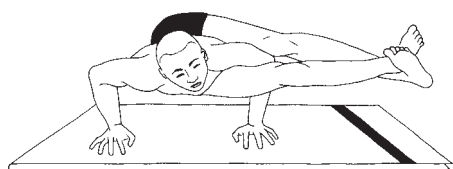
17.

BSY ©



18.

BSY ©



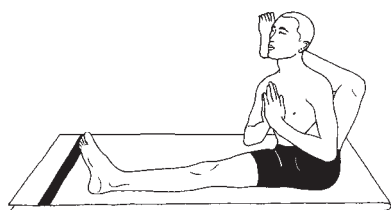
19.

BSY ©



21.

BSY ©



20.

BSY ©



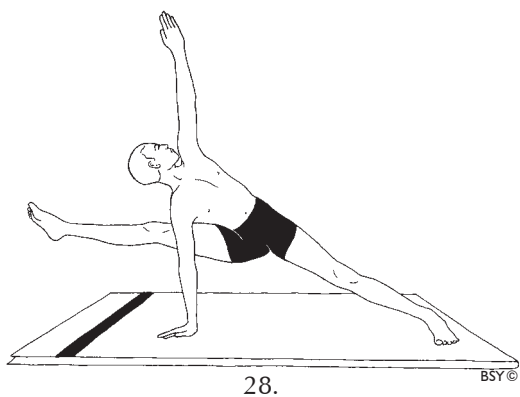
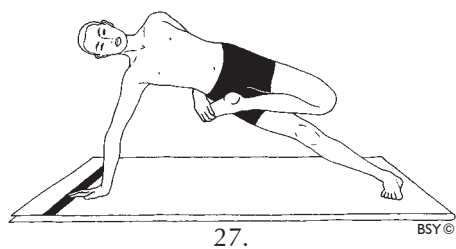
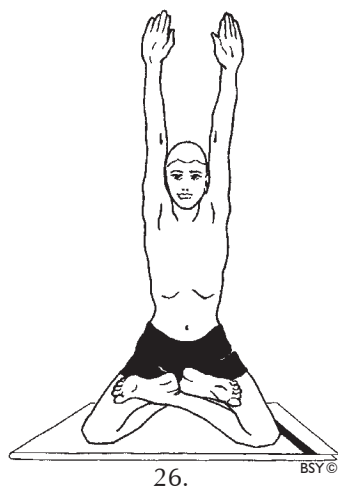
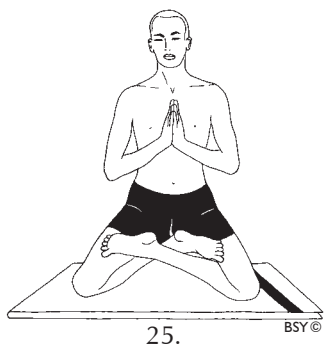
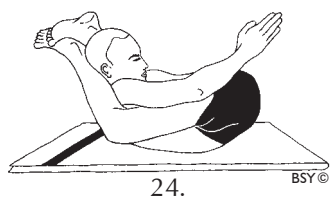
22.

BSY ©



23.

BSY ©



7

Meditation Asanas

PURPOSE

Why is steadiness of the asana so important during meditation?

Swami Sivananda: One must be able to sit in a meditation asana for a full three hours at a stretch without the body shaking. Then only will true *asana siddhi*, mastery over the asana, be gained, enabling practise of the higher stages of pranayama and dhyana. Without securing a steady asana, one cannot progress well in meditation. The steadier one is in the asana, the more one is able to concentrate with a one-pointed mind. If there is steadiness in a posture even for an hour, a one-pointed mind will be acquired, and there will be a feeling of *atmic anandam*, infinite peace and soulful bliss within.

What is the purpose of meditation asanas?

Swami Satyananda: The main purpose of the meditation asanas is to allow the practitioner to sit for extended periods of time without moving the body and without discomfort. Only when the body has been steady and still for some time will meditation be experienced. Deep meditation requires the spinal column to be straight and few asanas can satisfy this condition.

Furthermore, in high stages of meditation the practitioner loses control over the muscles of the body. The meditation

asana, therefore, needs to hold the body in a steady position without conscious effort. Why not lie in shavasana for meditation since it satisfies all the requirements? Because in shavasana there is a tendency to drift into sleep. It is essential to remain awake and alert while going through the various stages which lead to successful meditation.

Why are specific sitting postures recommended when practising meditation?

Swami Niranjanananda: In order to fulfill the requirements of steadiness and a straight back, neck and head, the classical meditation postures are best: padmasana, ardha padmasana, siddhasana or siddha yoni asana and vajrasana. All of these asanas allow for the free flow of breath when performed correctly. For regular practices and for advanced techniques, one of these asanas should be assumed as they have stood the test of time and scientific investigation.

Sukhasana, the easy pose, can be used if the other postures are too difficult. However, the aim should be to sit in one of the other postures eventually, as in sukhasana there is a tendency for the body to slump forward and compress the abdominal region. Not only is breathing enhanced by the correct upright position, but the flow of nerve impulses, tissue fluids and prana is also improved.

The meditation asanas provide a stable base for the trunk, as well as a pelvic position which keeps the trunk upright and steady. The location of the spine in relation to the pelvis should be such that the weight of the head and trunk bears down squarely on the base provided by the legs. This is achieved by projecting the buttocks slightly backwards and the lower back slightly forwards so that the pressure is on the ischial tuberosities (body prominences on the lower side of the buttocks). Incorrect posture tends to cause the back to slump, as extra strain is imposed on the lower back muscles, which relax over a period of time.

The head must also be in alignment with the base, to prevent undue muscular effort in holding it upright, and to

allow for a free flow of air through the trachea. Poor posture causes excessive strain on the spine and neck, and the lungs are compressed by the abdominal organs when the body is not held upright.

Why are certain meditative asanas used for higher practices?

Swami Niranjanananda: Four asanas belonging to the meditative group have been prescribed in the upanishadic texts. These are siddhasana, padmasana, bhadrasana and simhasana. They are used for higher practices in order to create spontaneous bandhas or pressure in different parts of the body. These bandhas permit the pranic flow to move in a specific direction and to awaken a particular chakra.

The practice of simhasana referred to here is not the lion pose in which one sticks out the tongue and roars; that is a variation of simhasana. Here simhasana is the posture in which one sits in vajrasana with the knees apart and the palms flat on the floor.

The purpose of these different meditative postures is to maintain the upright position of the spine, keep the head straight, prevent energy blockages from forming in any part of the body and allow for the free movement of the pranas within the body.

What are the important features of meditation asanas?

Swami Satyananda: The important feature of any meditative asana is that it should allow the practitioner to sit undisturbed in one position for extended periods of time without discomfort. Meditation practices aim to direct awareness inside the mind and this is totally impossible if the awareness is engrossed and entangled with external events, including the physical body. Introspection is impossible if one continually fidgets, scratches or experiences physical pain. Therefore the aim is to sit in a sufficiently comfortable position that allows the physical body to be forgotten.

The spine and head are held upright in all the meditative asanas. There are two main reasons for this. The first is to allow free breathing without the slightest hindrance. In other words, all the parts of the body concerned with breathing, namely the chest, diaphragm and abdomen, can move without interference. Secondly, a straight but relaxed spine is less likely to result in backache. This is a common problem with many people when they have to sit in one position for a reasonably long period of time.

Another common characteristic of the meditative asanas is that they have a firm and stable base. This is absolutely necessary in order for the body to remain steady throughout the meditation or pranayama practice. In all the meditative asanas, except *vajrasana*, the legs are folded so that they form a triangular base. This prevents the body from toppling either backwards or forwards. Furthermore, in this position the arms and hands can be placed in a comfortable position on the knees or in the lap. In this position they are not likely to cause any disturbance.

Most asanas are not suitable for meditation as they require some muscular effort or sense of balance in order to maintain them. One might assume that relaxation asanas, such as *shavasana*, the corpse pose, would be ideal for they require absolutely no effort. They are not recommended, however, as it is so easy to relax that one falls asleep, and sleep is as far away from meditation as tension. What is required is a high state of relaxation combined with intensified wakefulness. The sages in the past found that there are specific asanas most suitable in this respect. There are six of these, known as the classical meditation asanas:

1. *Padmasana*, lotus pose
2. *Siddhasana*, accomplished pose for men
3. *Siddha yoni asana*, accomplished pose for women
4. *Swastikasana*, auspicious pose
5. *Ardha padmasana*, half lotus pose
6. *Vajrasana*, the thunderbolt pose.

The first three of these asanas are traditionally accepted as the best meditative asanas. One should aim to sit in any one of these positions if possible. The second three asanas are also excellent meditative asanas, are far easier to perform and are nearly as good as the first three.

Many people find all six of these classical asanas too difficult and uncomfortable. Under these circumstances either of the following two simpler meditative asanas are suitable:

7. *Veerasana*, hero's pose

8. *Sukhasana*, easy pose.

The meditative asanas are designed so that the least amount of effort is required to maintain them. This is important in order to attain maximum relaxation and to be able to forget the body during meditation practices.

What is the classical understanding of perfection in a meditation asana?

Swami Satyananda: In the ancient text, the *Yoga Sutras*, Rishi Patanjali has tersely summed up the essence of meditative asanas (2:46–47):

Sthirasukhamasanam.

Prayatnashaithilyaananantasamaapattibhyaam.

Steady and comfortable should be the posture. (46)

By loosening of effort and by meditation on the serpent ananta, asana is mastered. (47)

The first sutra requires no explanation. “Loosening of effort”, means relaxing, not trying too hard. If one tries too hard without relaxing during asanas, more tension is created, instead of the desired aim of relaxation. The posture is mastered by relaxing effort and by concentrating the mind on ananta. The word *ananta* means, ‘endless’, and is also the name of the snake on which Lord Vishnu rests in the ocean of milk.

This mythological serpent symbolizes equilibrium, in particular the stability and correct orbit of the earth around the sun, but the idea behind it is that by thinking about the symbology – stability and equilibrium – the practitioner will feel these attributes in the position of his body. In this sutra the serpent also refers to the kundalini shakti, implying that the student should concentrate on the serpent power in the mooladhara chakra.

The connection of the word *ananta* with the notion of endlessness is significant; by invoking a feeling of endlessness, the individual will feel insignificant compared to the infinity around him. In this way, there will be less tendency to worry about trifling problems that prevent one from relaxing and sitting comfortably for a period of time.

RECOMMENDED MEDITATION ASANAS

Which meditation asanas are recommended by the classical texts of hatha yoga?

Swami Satyananda: A correct meditative posture is most important to a yogi. Therefore Yogi Swatmarama advises in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:33–34) that any follower of Matsyendranath must practise four meditative asanas:

Chaturasheetyaasanaani shivena kathitaani cha.

Tebhyashchatushkamaadaaya saarabhootam braveemyaham.

Siddham padmam tathaa simham bhadram veti chatushtayam.

Shreshtham tatraapi cha sukhe tishthetsiddhasane sadaa.

(In all) eighty-four asanas were taught by Shiva. Out of those I shall now describe the four important ones. (33)

Siddhasana, padmasana, simhasana and bhadrasana, these are the four main asanas. Always sit comfortably in siddhasana because it is the best. (34)

Hatharatnavali also lists these four as the most important. *Shiva Samhita* says siddhasana, padmasana, ugrasana

(paschimottanasana) and swastikasana are most important. The *Goraksha Satarka* mentions only two asanas as most important: siddhasana and padmasana.

What are some alternative meditation asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Apart from the postures which are classified as meditation asanas, there are other postures which are useful for meditation. Several are in the vajrasana group of asanas. These are:

1. *Vajrasana*, thunderbolt pose
2. *Ananda mairasana*, intoxicating bliss pose
3. *Padadhirasana*, breath balancing pose
4. *Bhadrasana*, gracious pose.

Other asanas, such as *gorakhshasana*, Yogi Gorakhnath's pose, or *moolabandhasana*, perineal contraction pose, may also be used for meditation, but they are advanced practices and not comfortable for prolonged periods of time.

Why do many westerners find it difficult to sit cross-legged?

Swami Niranjanananda: In India, where it is normal to sit in a squatting position from an early age, flexibility of the knees and hips is developed when young. In western countries, where it is normal to sit in a chair from an early age, mobility of the hips and knees is not developed, causing the legs to become stiff when sitting in cross-legged positions. While sitting cross-legged, the legs can easily go to sleep if they are even a millimetre out of alignment. Without proprioceptive awareness, or a sense of position, which is developed from a young age in cultures where squatting is the norm, the muscles around the joints tend to contract, the legs go out of alignment, and they go to sleep.

How does one know which meditative asana to practise?

Swami Satyananda: The most comfortable meditation asana should be chosen for use during practice. Three asanas – padmasana, siddhasana and siddha yoni asana – are

considered the best and a sincere practitioner should aim at eventually mastering one of these three. Some people believe that padmasana is superior to siddhasana and others say the opposite. Neither is superior; they are equally as good as each other. However, some practices of yoga, including kriya yoga, prescribe either padmasana or siddhasana for specific purposes. Siddha yoni asana is the female equivalent of siddhasana.

These three asanas are not the best or most suitable because they look spectacular or because they are difficult. There are practical reasons why they are the preferred sitting positions for meditation practice:

- These asanas provide the most stable and rigid sitting positions of all meditative asanas. The body feels as firm and as immovable as a rock.
- These asanas automatically encourage the practitioner to hold the back and spine upright with little or no effort. There is much less tendency to slump forwards compared to other sitting positions.
- The contact area between the body and the ground is large. This distributes the weight of the body over a wide area, preventing pain in the buttocks. This is one of the main faults of sukhasana – the body's weight is supported on a small area of the buttocks, which quickly results in discomfort.

Beginners are not expected to be able to sit in these three preferred asanas immediately, for they require flexibility of the legs. This suppleness can only be attained with regular practice over a period of time. In this case, meditation and pranayama practices can be performed using a simpler sitting position. For this purpose swastikasana, ardha padmasana and vajrasana are excellent asanas. Furthermore, they progressively loosen up the legs so that one can eventually sit in padmasana, siddhasana or siddha yoni asana. The three simpler asanas are all splendid sitting positions as they keep the back upright, provide a good area of contact with the floor, and are reasonably steady. Each

person must choose through personal experience which is most suitable.

If one cannot sit in any of these asanas, either sukhasana or veerasana can be used. These are both reasonably good sitting positions, but not as beneficial as the other sitting poses for the back easily slumps forward, creating discomfort.

Those who are exceptionally stiff may find all of these asanas unsuitable. Under these circumstances, one can sit with the legs outstretched in front of the body, if necessary leaning the back against a wall for support.

Sitting in a comfortable chair is often recommended for meditation and pranayama practices. However, it is not advisable as this quickly leads to discomfort; the body slumps forwards, one needs to move and be continually aware of the body. This occurs in even the plushiest armchairs. It is best not to practise while sitting in a chair of any kind. If, however, there is some physical reason why no other position is possible but one is comfortable in a chair, a chair can be used.

There must be a balance between so much discomfort that one cannot forget the body and so much comfort that one falls asleep. The meditative asanas listed in yogic texts have been found throughout thousands of years of practice to most perfectly fit this role.

PREPARATION FOR SITTING

How can steadiness in meditation be cultivated?

Swami Sivananda: When sitting in the posture, one must think: "I am as firm as a rock. Nothing can shake me." Give these suggestions to the mind a dozen times. Then the posture will soon become steady. One must become a living statue when sitting for meditation, only then will there be real steadiness in the posture.

How can mastery of meditation asanas be attained?

Swami Satyananda: Few people can sit in the classical meditation asanas without previously loosening up their

legs over a period of time. Those who can are usually children. For this reason, regular practice of special exercises is essential to loosen up the leg muscles and joints. With perseverance, even those people with the stiffest legs can master meditative asanas. The following selected practices from the pawanmuktasana series are most useful for preparing the body for the meditation asanas:

1. *Goolf chakra*, ankle rotation
2. *Janu chakra*, knee rotation
3. *Ardha titali asana*, half butterfly
4. *Shroni chakra*, hip rotation
5. *Poorna titali asana*, full butterfly
6. *Vayu nishkasana*, wind releasing pose
7. *Udarakarshanasana*, abdominal stretch pose
8. *Saithalyasana*, animal relaxation pose (forward bending group).

The mental attitude is very important. Be optimistic. Assume that it is only a matter of time and practice before sitting in any of the asanas becomes comfortable. When sitting in meditation postures, program the mind with suggestions like, "I am as steady as a rock", or, "I am becoming motionless like a statue." This way the asana will quickly become steady and, after a while, will be comfortable for extended periods of time. This is the practice of *kaya sthairyam*, complete body stillness. If this is believed, the mind, which controls the body, will automatically begin to make physical changes. In other words, the mind will fix a role and the body will prepare and change itself accordingly. The legs will become progressively flexible over a period of weeks and months. Both regular physical loosening up exercises and mental determination are necessary.

It brings a wonderful feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction to eventually sit in one of the more difficult classical meditative asanas for the first time. The final pose may only be held for a second or so before discomfort obliges one to quickly unfold the legs. Yet at this stage, one has more than passed the halfway mark towards full

proficiency in the asana (called *asana siddhi* in Sanskrit). The aim is then to extend the period of time in which the final pose can be maintained. This must be done slowly over a period of weeks and months. No excessive force should be used; all that is necessary is to increase the duration by a few seconds every day.

Eventually it should be possible to sit in a meditative asana for half an hour and more, without the slightest urge to move the body. This implies that the asana is comfortable and without the slightest physical pain. With this ability, one starts to gain the most from meditation and pranayama practices. Awareness will more easily become one-pointed, as it will not be disturbed by discomfort of the body.

How can the body be prepared for sitting during pranayama and meditation?

Swami Satyananda: It is essential for the body to be as comfortable and relaxed as possible during meditative and pranayama practices. Even those who can sit in all the meditative asanas without the slightest difficulty will occasionally experience stiffness. This is especially likely in the early morning when the body is stiffer than at any other time of the day.

For this reason a program of asanas is recommended before practising meditation and pranayama. These will not only loosen up the whole body in preparation for the sitting pose, but will also calm the mind. The practices of pawanmuktasana part one for the lower body are particularly recommended. It is not necessary to do them all – one or two are sufficient. In particular, the half butterfly and hip rotation are recommended. These can be done in a few minutes. More of the exercises should be done if there is time. By performing these simple exercises there will be less trouble from aches and pains in the legs, and more will be gained from the seated practices. These exercises should be done just before commencing meditation and pranayama, by both beginners and experts alike. These exercises are

especially useful if there is no time to perform asanas, perhaps in the evening.

What precautions should be observed when practising meditation asanas?

Swami Satyananda: If there is discomfort or pain in the legs after sitting for some time in a meditation asana, the legs should slowly be unlocked and then massaged. When the blood circulation has returned to normal and there is no pain, resume the asana.

One should be aware that the knee is a delicate and much abused joint of the body and care must be taken not to strain it, especially while moving into or out of these meditation asanas. Undue force or strain should never be used to sit in a meditation asana. The contra-indications given for individual asanas must be observed.

Should one force the body into meditation asanas?

Swami Satyananda: Under no circumstances should excessive force be used to try to sit in any of these asanas. It is better to be patient and wait for the leg muscles to stretch and become more flexible over a period of time. Strain will only cause more harm than good.

How important is the posture of the back in meditation asanas?

Swami Satyananda: The most common mistake made by beginners when they sit in a meditative asana is to hold the back too straight. That is, they sit with their back arched, the navel pushed forwards and the head thrown backwards. This may look impressive, especially to people who do not practise yoga, but it is not very comfortable. Further, not many people will be able to maintain this position for more than a few minutes without slumping forwards. This is merely replacing one extreme with another.

When teachers give the instruction to keep the spine straight, they are asking the impossible, for the normal

shape or contour of the spine is certainly not straight, it is S-shaped. No matter how much one tries, the spine cannot be made perfectly straight – the bone structure prevents this. When the instruction is given to keep the spine straight, it means that the back should be held upright without slumping forwards or being arched backwards. In other words, the spine is allowed to take the position in which it is most comfortable. Through personal experience one discovers which is the best position for the back.

It is most important to avoid either slumping forwards or straining backwards. Both of these positions prevent optimum relaxation and free breathing. It is impossible to relax if one is struggling to hold the spine in an abnormally arched position, just as it is impossible to relax with an aching back from a forward slumped position. Backache is likely to occur if one is slumped forwards. It is essential for optimum results to hold the head and back in a comfortable upright position.

What should be done if there is pain in the legs or back during a seated practice?

Swami Satyananda: Whichever sitting asana is used in the beginning, one is sure to feel aches and pains in the back and legs. Over a period of time this tendency can be removed by daily practice of asanas that exercise and flex the whole body, strengthening the muscles, loosening the joints and releasing tension in the nerves. These other asanas not only prepare the body for the sitting positions, but help to bring about health of mind and body.

After sitting in one position for some time, these aches and pains can be removed in a variety of ways. The best way to remove leg pains is to slowly straighten the legs and then bend them a few times at the knees. This quickly releases tension. The best way to remove backache is to bend the back forwards, backwards and then to the right and the left. Three excellent asanas are *shashankasana*, pose of the moon, *bhujangasana*, cobra pose, and *meru wakrasana*, spinal twist

pose. There are many more asanas that can be used; each person can experiment and find out for himself the most suitable ones.

There is conflicting opinion as to whether one should bear aches and pains without moving during meditation and pranayama, or remove the aches and pains by adjusting the position of the body and then continuing the practice. Discretion must be used.

Ideally one should not move while performing meditation or pranayama practices, but this is difficult if great pain is being suffered. Furthermore, it is impossible to be fully aware of the practice if one's attention is diverted due to physical pain. Therefore it is recommended that a reasonable degree of discomfort be tolerated, for if one is absorbed in the practice it is possible to forget the aches and pains. However, if the aches and pains are overwhelming, and there is no chance of being able to forget the body, the position should be adjusted, the limbs loosened up and the sitting position resumed for the continuation of the practice.

Eventually this problem will not arise, as the body will become sufficiently flexible and relaxed to prevent discomfort, and awareness will become increasingly fixed on performing the practice. Under these circumstances there will not be awareness of pain, even if the body is uncomfortable, and there will be no tendency to move or fidget.

How can the duration of comfort in meditative asanas be prolonged?

Swami Satyananda: Kaya sthairyam, the meditative practice of body stillness, is an excellent technique for progressively lengthening the time that one can remain in a meditative asana. One of the meditative asanas is chosen, and over a period of weeks and months the time that it is held without movement is progressively increased. One must be realistic and only sit in the asana for as long as it can be comfortably held. Each day gradually increase the duration.

While sitting in the asana, practise *kaya sthairyam*. Make a resolve to remain in the asana for a prescribed length of time. Try not to make the slightest movement even though there may be discomfort. In this way, mastery will eventually be gained over the meditative asana. At the same time one is being prepared for meditation techniques, either immediately afterwards or some time in the future.

SUKHASANA: EASY POSE

Is sukhasana, the easy pose, recognized as a meditation posture in hatha yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Sage Gheranda has recognized this simple sitting position as an asana. Its other name is *muktasana*, the free pose. In *Gheranda Samhita* (2:12) it is described:

*Paayumoole vaamagulpham dakshagulpham tathopari;
Samakaayashirogreevam muktaasanam tu siddhidam.*

Keeping the left heel close to the perineum, place the right heel over it and sit with the head, neck and body upright and straight. *Muktasana* provides *siddhi* (perfection) to yogis.

The practice of *muktasana* is very simple, and most people can sit in this asana. While sitting in this asana the entire weight of the body is supported by the buttocks, sometimes

with a very small area in contact with the floor. Due to this, the base of the body may become painful when sitting in *sukhasana* for longer periods of time. To alleviate this, place a pillow underneath the buttocks.

The verse says, *samakaayashirogreevam*, the head and trunk should remain in one line. All



the meditative practices involve sitting still and steady. In muktasana, or sukhāsana, the hands are generally placed on the knees in jnana mudra or chin mudra. The eyes are kept closed. The whole body is relaxed. Its main purpose is to hold the trunk, spine and head in one straight line.

For beginners it is the easiest and most comfortable of all the cross-legged meditative asanas. It can also be used by those who are unable to sit in meditative asanas that require greater flexibility in the legs, facilitating physical and mental balance without causing strain or pain.

For those who are extremely stiff, sukhāsana may be performed sitting cross-legged with a cloth tied around the knees and lower back, so that the weight of the knees is supported and the legs can relax. Concentration should be on physical balance and equalizing the weight on the right and left sides of the body. A light, spacey feeling may be experienced.

It can also be used as a relaxation asana after prolonged sitting in siddhasana or padmasana.

PADMASANA: LOTUS POSE

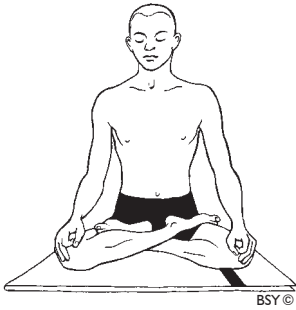
What is the meaning and significance of padmasana?

Swami Sivananda: Padma means lotus. When the asana is performed it presents the appearance of a lotus, in a way; hence the name padmasana. It is also known by the name *kamalasana*, as kamal means lotus.

Amongst the four poses prescribed for japa and dhyana, padmasana is the foremost. It is the best asana for contemplation. Rishis like Gheranda, Shandilya and others speak highly of this vital asana.

Why is padmasana revered as a meditative asana?

Swami Satyananda: Padmasana, the lotus pose, is one of the best meditative asanas. The sitting position itself is conducive to physical and mental calmness. At first it is quite difficult for most people to perform, and uncomfortable if held for



more than a few minutes. However, with practice this asana will prove far more comfortable than the simpler sitting positions, such as veerasana and sukhasana. It holds the trunk of the body and the head as though they are a pillar, with the legs as its firm foundation. This asana almost automatically makes one want to be still. It is with good reason that Buddha is usually depicted in this pose.

How is padmasana described in the classical hatha yoga tradition?

Swami Satyananda: Padmasana is a well known asana which is also called *kamalasana*. *Padma* and *kamala* mean 'lotus'. When one thinks of a yogi one usually imagines somebody sitting in padmasana, as it is the traditional meditative posture. The body is locked firmly in position and physical movements are reduced to a minimum. The lower back is naturally held straight and one can almost feel the balancing effect on the body. In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:44–47) several verses describe padmasana:

Vaamorupari dakshinam cha charanam samsthaapy vaamam tathaa;

Dakshorupari pashchimena vidhinaa dhritvaa karaabhyaam dridham.

Angushthau hridaye nidhaaya chibukam naasaagramaalokayet;
Etadvyaadhivinaashakaari yaminaam padmaasanam prochyate.

Uttaanau charanau kritvaa oorusamsthau prayatnatah;
Oorumadhye tathottaanau paanee kritvaa tato drishau.

Naasaagre vinyasedraajadantamoole tu jihvayaa;
Uttambhya chibukam vakshasyutthaapy pavanam shanaih.

Idam padmaasanam proktam sarvavyaadhivinaashanam;
Durlabham yena kenaapi dheemataa labhyate bhuvi.

Place the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh, cross the hands behind the back and firmly hold the toes. Press the chin against the chest and look at the tip of the nose. This is called padmasana, the destroyer of a yogi's diseases. (44)

Place the feet on the thighs, soles upward, palms in the middle of the groin, facing upward. (45)

Gaze at the nosetip, keeping the tongue pressed against the root of the upper teeth and the chin against the chest, and slowly raise the prana upward. (46)

This is called padmasana, destroyer of all diseases. Ordinary people cannot achieve this posture, only the few wise ones on this earth can. (47)

The asana described in verse 44 is commonly known as *baddha padmasana*. In this asana the legs are positioned as in padmasana but the arms are placed differently. In padmasana as it is practised today, the hands are kept either in jnana, chin, bhairavi, bhairava or yoni mudra.

In order to "raise the prana", one should practise maha bandha with external breath retention. Raising the prana means to draw up the energy which normally flows downward and outward. The purpose of hatha yoga is to reverse the free-flowing downward movement of apana and the upward movement of prana. This means holding the apana within the area of *samana*, the navel region. before it flows out, and holding the prana there before it moves up. This causes a pranic reaction and a more potent energy is created which rises through sushumna. Padmasana alone is not enough to induce this rising of prana, therefore, pranayama, bandha and mudra are incorporated.

Yogi Swatmarama says that padmasana is the destroyer of disease. It brings about changes in the metabolic structure and brain patterns, helping create balance in the whole system. As with siddhasana, it also presses and stimulates the acupuncture meridians of the stomach, gall bladder, spleen, kidneys and

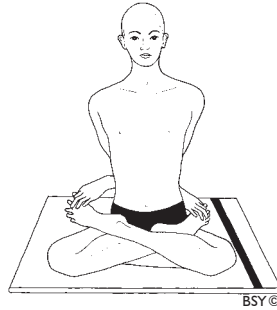
liver. Perfect functioning of these organs is essential for good health. Padmasana tones the sacral and coccygeal nerves by supplying them with an increased flow of blood.

Blood flow to the legs is decreased and directed to the abdominal region. This is helpful for people with emotional and nervous disorders. However, people with sciatica or sacral infections should not do padmasana until the problem is alleviated.

Yogi Swatmarama says, "Ordinary people cannot achieve padmasana, only the few wise ones on this earth can." What does he mean by that? He means that the average person cannot perform padmasana, and only those who are regular practitioners of yoga can maintain the posture for long periods of time.



Padmasana with
mudra and bandha



Baddha Padmasana

How can the practice of padmasana lead to the awakening of kundalini?

Swami Satyananda: In *Hatha Yoga Pradipka* (1:48) Yogi Swatmarama states:

*Kritvaasamputitau karau dhridhataram baddhvaatu padmama-
asanam*

*Gaadham vakshasi sannidhaaya chibukam dhyayamshcha
tachchetasi.*

*Vaaramvaaramapaanamoordhvamanilam protsaarayanpooritam
Nyanchanpraanamupaiti bodhamatulam shaktiprabhaavaannarah.*

(Sitting in padmasana) keeping the palms one above the other, chin on the chest and concentrate the mind (chitta) on Him (the Self). Repeatedly draw the vital air up from the anal region and bring the inhaled prana downwards. (Thus joining the two) one gets the highest knowledge by awakening the Shakti.

By practising padmasana in the described manner and reversing the natural flow of prana and apana, the potential force in the pranic system and the higher faculties of the mind are awakened. Everyone has this potential, but most people only operate on a very low current of energy and thus use only a small portion of the brain's capacity.

To awaken the dormant centres of the brain the energy level has to be increased, and to increase the prana, the positive and negative energies have to be brought together. When they unite an explosion occurs, releasing a greater quantum of energy. This union must take place in one of the vital centres so that the released energy travels through sushumna to the higher brain centres. This energy is called *kundalini*. What Yogi Swatmarama has described is the process which takes place through practising uddiyana bandha and moola bandha.

Yogi Swatmarama is giving the basic technique for the practice of further kriyas. Correct sitting position is the first prerequisite for the practices of pranayama, mudra, bandha, dharana and dhyana.

How is padmasana practised in hatha yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, padmasana is counted as one of the four most important asanas; both the simple and bound variations are hinted at. The basic position of the limbs, jalandhara bandha and nasikagra drishti are the same as in *Gheranda Samhita*, with the added detail of pressing the tongue behind the teeth.

However, when describing the benefits of the posture (HYP 1:48–49), Yogi Swatmarama's instruction is to have

the palms one on top of the other; that is, the hands are released, and a description is given of the technique for each inhalation and exhalation, indicating that jalandhara bandha must be released: “Keeping the palms one above the other, chin on the chest, and concentrating the mind on the Self, repeatedly draw the vital air up from the anal region and bring the inhaled prana downwards. (Thus joining the two) one gets the highest knowledge by awakening the shakti. The yogi who, seated in padmasana, inhales through the entrances of the nadis and fills them with vital air (maruta) undoubtedly gains liberation.” The description in *Shiva Samhita* (3:88) is slightly different:

*Uttaanau charanau kritvaa oorusamsthau prayatnatah.
Oorumadhye tathottaanau paanee kritvaa tu taadrishau.
Naasaagre vinyaseddrishtim dantamoolancha jihvayaa.
Uttolya chibukam vaksha utthaapya pavanam shanaih.
Yathaashaktyaa samaakrishya poorayedudaram shanaih.
Yathaa shaktyaiva pashchaattu rechayedavirodhatah.
Idam padmaasanam proktam sarvaavyaadhivinaashanam.*

I describe now the padmasana which wards off (or cures) all diseases: having crossed the legs, carefully place the feet on the opposite thighs; cross both the hands and place them similarly on the thighs; fix the sight on the tip of the nose; pressing the tongue against the root of the teeth (the chin should be elevated, the chest expanded), draw the air in slowly, fill the chest with all your might, and expel it slowly, in an unobstructed stream.

Again, it can be seen that the practice should be learned from an experienced guide. Sitting in padmasana is not just a matter of increasing physical flexibility. Rather, the physical posture facilitates raising the energy and the mental capacity, so that one becomes able to concentrate on the inner self.

Does the practice of padmasana include mudra and bandha in classical hatha yoga?

Swami Niranjanananda: Padmasana is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:9):

Vaamoroopari dakshinam hi charanam samsthaapya vaamam tathaa

Dakshoroopari paschimena vidhinaa dhritvaa karaabhyaam dridham;

Angushthau hridhaye nidhaaya chibukam naasaagramaalokayet Etadvyaadhivikaaranaashanakaram padmaasanam prochyate.

Keeping the left foot on the right thigh and the right foot on the left thigh, bring the arms behind the back and catch hold of the left big toe with the right hand and the right big toe firmly with the left hand, look at the nosetip, keeping the chin in contact with the heart. It eradicates all diseases. It is called padmasana.

The text says that padmasana includes jalandhara bandha and nasikagra drishti. The inclusion of jalandhara bandha implies kumbhaka and its effects. In *nasikagra drishti*, nosetip gazing, the eyes should be half open and the gaze should be fixed at the nosetip. This is a highly effective technique for internalizing the mind, and a powerful way of making chitta one-pointed and peaceful. Other texts include khechari mudra.

Why does padmasana lead to deep states of relaxation?

Swami Niranjanananda: Padmasana is helpful in achieving physical and mental stability and peace. This is not simply a belief, but a physiological fact. It has been shown that during such asanas, sensations emanating from the lower spinal column through a group of nadis enter the brain, calming the nervous system. The experience of mental peace subsequently enhances physical health.

In padmasana, pressure is exerted on the lower vertebral column, resulting in relaxation of the nervous system. The

breathing becomes slow, muscular tension is reduced and the blood pressure is lowered. Physical stability induces mental stability. Due to the positioning of the feet and the pressure exerted on the thighs, the circulation of blood to the lower limbs is reduced and the blood flow to the abdomen is increased, activating the digestive fire and increasing the appetite.

Ida and pingala are the two main nadis located along the vertebral column. Their influence spreads to every part of the body. These nadis have a relationship with the nerves carrying sensory information to the brain, providing knowledge and enabling awareness to arise. While in padmasana, this process of receiving and acting on sensory input is subdued. Physiologically, this means that reduced stimulation takes place and there is a state of calmness. During this process, beta, alpha and theta waves are generated. Padmasana also facilitates the experience of meditation by directing the flow of prana from mooladhara to sahasrara.

What are the psychophysiological effects of padmasana?

Swami Niranjanananda: When sitting in padmasana there is pressure on the lower spine, which has a relaxing effect on the nervous system. The breath automatically slows down, muscular tension is decreased and blood pressure reduced. When mastered, this posture holds the body completely steady for long periods of time. As the body and mind are interconnected, steadiness of body brings steadiness of mind.

This steadiness is the first step towards productive meditation. There is deeper concentration of the mind. The mind is not pulled from one tense area of the body to another or from one stressful experience to another. This allows the concentration to go deeper into the experience of *akasha*, space. This is the mental benefit of padmasana.

There is also a psychic benefit. Padmasana directs the flow of prana up sushumna from mooladhara to sahasrara,

thus increasing the meditative experience. Along with the awareness of space, one begins to experience the symbol, or yantra, and concentration on the chakras is developed. In this way padmasana becomes a tool for the awakening of kundalini shakti.

How can the effect of padmasana on mind and prana lead to self-realization?

Swami Satyananda: In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:49) this process is described:

*Padmaasane sthito yogee naadeedvaarena pooritam;
Maarutam dhaarayedyastu sa muktonaatra samshayah.*

The yogi who, seated in padmasana, inhales through the entrances of the nadis and fills them with maruta or vital air gains liberation; there is no doubt about it.

Maruta is another word for prana but it also has other meanings. The Upanishads say that there are forty-nine maruta. They are described as being brothers of Lord Indra. *Indra* represents the individual mind and is the controller of the senses or *indriyas*, thus the *maruta* represent the forty-nine essential faculties or powers of the mind. They are also represented by the forty-nine letters of the Sanskrit alphabet, and each part of the body is associated with a particular letter. Every part of the body has a corresponding centre in the brain and its own *bija*, seed, mantra located in the psychic body and mind.

To absorb maruta is to withdraw the extroverted energy of the body and senses into the nadis. This prevents an outward flow of prana, the associated brain centres are not activated and the energy is channelled into the brain centres responsible for higher consciousness. When a practitioner establishes himself in padmasana and reverses the pranic process, the consciousness is liberated from individual experience and existence. Mind and prana are intricately linked.

Just as there are two poles of energy, the negative and positive forces, so there are two poles of individual consciousness – time and space. The left hemisphere of the brain functions according to the sequence of time, and the right hemisphere of the brain operates according to the principle of space. When these two opposite poles come together there is a higher awakening. This means, for the whole brain to be active, both hemispheres must function at the same time.

Hatha yoga accomplishes this by uniting the two poles of *shakti*: the passive and the dynamic forces, *ida* and *pingala*. This creates a third force, known as *kundalini*. It is man's potential spiritual energy, which is responsible for all the higher qualities of mind. The shakti is created in the lower body centres and rises to the higher brain centres, thus manifesting the pure consciousness. When this takes place, the finite awareness operating through the senses and the sensory experiences ceases to function. The poles of duality no longer exist, as they have been united; only the higher awareness exists. This is called emancipation.

The raja and dhyana yogi aims to achieve this through concentration of mind, but the hatha yogi achieves it by uniting the pranas, whereby the mind automatically becomes still. He does not have to come into confrontation with the gross tendencies of the lower mind; the mind is transcended by concentrating on the physical aspect of prana. The effect of padmasana on the pranas is described in *Shiva Samhita* (3:90–91):

*Anushthaane krite praanah samashchalati tatkshanaat.
Bhavedabhyaasane samyaksaadhakasya na samshayah.*

*Padmaasane sthito yogee praanaapaanavidhaanatah.
Poorayetsa vimuktah syaatsatyam satyam vadaamyaham.*

By performing and practising this posture, undoubtedly the vital airs of the practitioner at once become completely equable, and flow harmoniously through the body. (90)

Sitting in the padmasana posture, and knowing the action of the prana and apana, when the yogi performs the regulation of the breath, he is emancipated. I tell you the truth. Verily, I tell you the truth. (91)

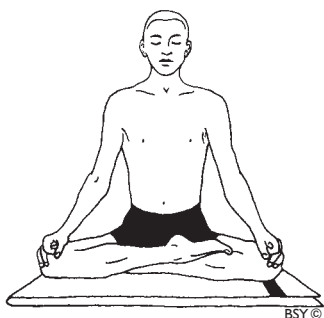
Liberation is not a religious word. It indicates a scientific process of uniting two opposite forces. When these opposite forces combine, an explosion occurs which releases potential energy. In tantra the forces are called Shiva and Shakti; in yoga, chitta and prana; in Samkhya, purusha and prakriti; in Vedanta, Brahman and jiva; and in physics, time and space. These two forces cannot meet at any point, they must unite in the nucleus of matter. When the opposite forces of shakti unite in mooladhara or manipura chakra, the explosion which occurs releases the potential energy from that centre. Science has seen, when time and space meet in the nucleus of matter, that matter explodes into thousands and thousands of particles. This is the basis of creation. It is how each and every one was born, and by the same process the potential consciousness can be liberated from the gross mind.

All living matter is the combination of two forces, prana and consciousness. With evolution of the body, the consciousness becomes more apparent, and in this world man is the closest to developing pure consciousness. Through the 'fire of yoga' the consciousness can be liberated from the gross matter of mind and body. This is the experience of *atmanubhuti*, *atma darshan*, self-realization, *moksha* or *samadhi*. Whatever it may be called, it is one and the same process, which commences with the practice of asana and the perfection of a comfortable meditative posture, such as padmasana.

SWASTIKASANA: THE AUSPICIOUS POSE

What is the meaning and significance of swastikasana?

Swami Satyananda: The Sanskrit word *swastika* means 'auspicious' or 'favourable'. It is symbolized by the swastika,



which is known by various religions and cults throughout the world. Some people regard it as the most universal of symbols. It is only in the twentieth century that it developed negative associations. The symbol has many meanings, however, a common one is that its spokes represent the different corners of the world and the

universe, and that everything has a meeting point and common centre – consciousness. This asana can be regarded as the one most favourable for realizing the unity of existence.

Swastikasana looks very similar to siddhasana but it is far easier to perform as neither of the heels apply pressure at the base of the trunk. In *Shiva Samhita* (3:97) it is written:

*Sukhaasanamidam proktam sarvaduḥkhaṇaśānaṁ.
Svastikam yogibhirgopyam svasteekaranamuttamam.*

This is also called the sukhasana, the easy posture. This health-giving, good swastikasana should be kept secret by the yogi.

What is the effect of swastikasana on the physical and pranic bodies?

Swami Satyananda: Although swastikasana is a steady sitting position, it affects the whole body. Prana shakti is directed in a particular manner suitable for meditation. The nadis at the back of the legs are stimulated. The exact points of stimulation can be found by pressing along the acupuncture meridians and identifying those points that are particularly tender and sensitive. These nadis carry energy to centres in the spinal column and the energy is distributed from there. When one sits in any meditative pose the main nadis are stimulated.

The sciatic nerve is gently massaged in swastikasana, influencing the lumbar region. The abdominal muscles are also influenced and the inner body temperature is affected.

Swastikasana is described in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:19):

*Jaanoorvorantare samyakkritvaa paadatale ubhe;
Rijukaayah samaaseenah svastikam tatprachakshate.*

Placing both soles (of the feet) on the inner side of the thighs, sitting equipoised with a straight body; this is called swastika (asana).

Yogi Swatmarama does not forget to state that the body should be straight – that is, in alignment. This is of prime importance in any asana practice. For meditation it is essential that the spinal column is straight, so that nervous impulses can pass freely to the brain. Furthermore, the main nadi, sushumna, is situated within the spinal cord and the impulses must also be able to run straight up this nadi when the energy wants to rise. If one bends or leans to one side, either ida or pingala will be suppressed and the other will become predominant. The aim is to activate sushumna, therefore, the body must be in alignment and in a balanced position, so that there is no obstruction to the flow of prana.

Swastikasana and its effects are described in *Shiva Samhita* (3:95–96):

*Jaanoorvorantare samyagdhritvaa paadatale ubhe.
Samakaayah sukhaaseenah svastikam tatprachakshate.*

*Anena vidhinaa yogee maarutam saadhayetsudheeh.
Dehe na kramate vyaadhistasya vaayushcha siddhyati.*

Place the soles of the feet completely under the thighs, keep the body straight and sit at ease. This is called swastikasana. (95)

In this way, the wise yogi should practise the regulation of the air. No disease can attack his body, and he obtains vayu siddhi. (96)

The symbol of the swastika represents fertility, creativity and auspiciousness. This asana, being so named, induces the same capacity in the body.

When should swastikasana be used for meditation?

Swami Niranjanananda: Swastikasana is useful for extended periods of sitting if one lacks the flexibility in the knees and ankles required for siddhasana. The main difference between the simple variation of siddhasana and swastikasana is that in siddhasana the heels remain one over the other and the feet are inserted between the thighs and calves. In swastikasana, only the toes are inserted and the heel does not exert pressure on the perineum. It could be said that swastikasana is a simplified variation of siddhasana. It is used as a stable asana for meditation. *Swastikasana*, the auspicious pose, is one of the main meditation asanas recommended by Sage Gheranda. It is described in *Gheranda Samhita* (2:14):

*Jaanoorvorantare kritvaa yogee paadatale ubhe;
Rijukaayasamaaseenah svastikam tatprachakshate.*

Placing both the soles between the thighs and knees, adopt a triangular posture and sit with a balanced feeling. This is called swastikasana.

Swastikasana has the same benefits as the simple variation of siddhasana but at a reduced level, as the chakra locations are not directly stimulated.

SIDDHASANA: ACCOMPLISHED POSE

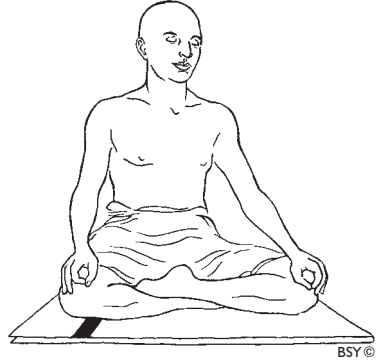
What are the best meditation asanas?

Swami Sivananda: Siddhasana was practised by many siddhas of yore; hence the name siddhasana. Books on hatha yoga eulogise the merits and advantages of padmasana and siddhasana to a high degree. One who sits in either of these for even fifteen minutes daily with the eyes closed,

concentrating on God at the lotus of the heart, destroys all sins and quickly attains moksha.

What is the meaning and significance of siddhasana?

Swami Satyananda: The Sanskrit word *siddha* has many meanings and implications. It means ‘power’ and ‘perfection’, so this asana can also be called the perfect pose or the powerful pose. The word *siddhi* is derived from *siddha* and means a psychic power or faculty developed through yogic practices. This includes clairvoyance and telepathy, as well as many other lesser known powers such as the ability to disappear at will. Siddhasana is believed to be the asana that helps to develop these powers. Siddhasana is an excellent meditative asana and the equal of padmasana. In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:38) it is written:



*Yameshiva mitaahaaramahimsaam niyameshiva.
Mukhyam sarvaasaneshvekam siddhaah siddhasanam viduh.*

Just as moderate diet is the most important of the yamas, and non-violence, of the niyamas, so the siddhas know that siddhasana is the most important of the asanas.

Siddhasana is often used in specific practices as it applies pressure on mooladhara chakra in the region between the anus and the sexual organs. Siddhasana can only be practised by men.

The female equivalent is called *siddha yoni asana*. The Sanskrit word *yoni* means ‘womb’ or ‘source’. In this context it means that this asana is the female equivalent of siddhasana. It is practised by women, instead of siddhasana.

Why is siddhasana said to be the best posture for meditation?

Swami Satyananda: When one first starts to practise meditation other postures can be used, but in the final stages, when the external consciousness drops and inner consciousness begins to pervade, siddhasana is the best posture as it enables one to handle the changes that take place in the body during deep meditation. In *Hatharatnavali* (3:28) it is written:

Naasanam siddhasadrisham kumbhakam kevalopamah.

Na khecharyaa samaa mudraa na naadasadrisho layah.

There is no asana like siddha, and no kumbhaka like kevala; there is no mudra like khechari, and no laya like nada.



When the mental fluctuations cease, inner consciousness blooms forth and exterior consciousness withdraws, the body metabolism alters. The brainwaves, inner body temperature and skin resistance undergo tremendous changes, and the effects on the consciousness can be detrimental if one is not careful. Siddhasana prevents

nervous depression from occurring during meditation, as it stops the blood pressure from falling too low, regulates the production of the male hormone testosterone, and helps maintain the inner body temperature.

Many people consider padmasana to be the ultimate posture for meditation, however, siddhasana is more useful in the process of reversing the pranic flow as the vajra nadi is pressed, thus preventing an outward energy flow. Siddhasana is also easier to practise and maintain. In siddhasana the feet are less likely to fall asleep and the body is locked firmly in its position.

Additionally, siddhasana stabilizes cardiac function, and if practised throughout life, it bestows protection from emotional ravages and stabilizes the passions. Swami Sivananda has said that siddhasana is actually the best practice for most people, even those with large thighs, and it is essential for those who wish to observe celibacy. If one can master this asana siddhis will be aquired. In *Shiva Samhita* (3:86–87) it states:

*Yenaabhyasavashaachchheeghrām yoganiṣṭhāpattimāpnu yaat;
Siddhaasanam sadā sevyaṁ pavānaabhyāsinā param.*

*Yena samsāramutsriṣṭiḥ labhate paramāṁ gatim;
Nāstah parataram guhyamaasanam vidyate bhuvī.
Yenaanudhyānāmatrena yogee paapaadvimucyate.*

He who wishes to attain quick consummation of yoga should adopt the siddhasana posture and practise regulation of the breath. (86)

Through this posture the yogi, leaving the world, attains the highest end and throughout the world there is no posture more secret than this. By assuming and contemplating in this posture, the yogi is freed from sin. (87)

Both asanas, however, are designed for effective dharana, dhyana and samadhi. Padmasana specifically balances prana, and siddhasana maintains blood pressure and balances both the pranic and mental forces.

What is the effect of siddhasana and siddha yoni asana on the chakras?

Swami Satyananda: Siddhasana is important for stimulating ajna chakra and controlling nervous and pranic impulses from mooladhara and swadhisthana chakras. When ajna is awakened, the realm of pure consciousness is experienced. It is beyond the effects of *prakṛiti*, or nature, and is therefore the door to liberation.

Siddhasana is a purely meditative posture. It is designed to channel the *prana* or vital energy directly to ajna chakra. The classical hatha yoga texts describe siddhasana with shambhavi mudra and the chin on the chest. Shambhavi mudra stimulates ajna chakra so that the pranic impulses coming up from the lower centres can be received. When the chin is placed on the chest, simplified forms of jalandhara bandha and ujjayi pranayama are automatically performed. This adjusts the heart rate, blood pressure and brainwave pattern.

Siddhasana stabilizes the two lower psychic centres, mooladhara chakra and swadhisthana chakra, redirecting prana upward towards the higher centres. Blockage of energy within these two centres is responsible for many health problems; and also poses a barrier which has to be crossed in spiritual life. Mooladhara is the root centre in which an infinite source of pranic energy lies dormant, while swadhisthana is the centre responsible for the sexual and emotional metabolism in which psychic energy most spontaneously manifests itself. When emotional life does not extend beyond this plane, blood pressure and cardiac function remain unstable, and one's role and purpose in life remain ill-defined and unclear. On a pranic level, siddhasana balances the alternating flows of ida and pingala nadis, thus activating sushumna.

What makes siddhasana such a unique meditation asana?

Swami Niranjanananda: Siddhasana moves the focus of concentration to the centre of the body. The sense of touch has a profound, stimulating effect on the central nervous system. When one touches oneself, different nerves and sensations are awakened. For example, in swastikasana the sense of touch has a soothing, relaxing effect, whereas in siddhasana the central nervous system is stimulated in a profound way. The pleasure centres of the brain are stimulated yet, at the same time they are regulated and controlled. By stimulating mooladhara and swadhisthana,

the base of the brain is directly affected as well as all the functions of the hypothalamus, pineal and pituitary areas, where the basic instinctual drives of sleep, hunger, reproduction and so forth are controlled.

Physiologically, this is one of the most powerful postures as it balances the functioning of the reproductive system. Most people are either hypertense in this area and hold in repressed energy in the form of a defence mechanism, or they lack tone. Siddhasana helps to rebalance in either direction. It can reduce the testosterone level and increase or decrease blood pressure.

Yogis use this posture for a specific reason. In this asana the two sexually related psycho-muscular locks are performed simultaneously: moola bandha, by exerting external pressure on the perineum, and vajroli mudra, by exerting external pressure on the urinary organ. In this way the sexual impulses are redirected from the lower chakras of mooladhara and swadhisthana through the spine to the brain. Physically, siddhasana is practised for maintenance of brahmacharya. Spiritually, it is practised to reverse the energy flows of apana, and of mooladhara and swadhisthana chakras, from the gross to the transcendental level.

In padmasana there is no stimulation of the sexual centres. Concentration is on the alignment of the body and there is the feeling of floating in space. In siddhasana there is intense awareness of the pressure at mooladhara chakra, and of the movement of energy from mooladhara along the spinal passage towards the brain. If one sits in siddhasana for extended periods, there will be a noticeable tingling sensation in the mooladhara region for ten or fifteen minutes. This could be caused by a reduction in the blood supply, or by a resettling of the pranic flow in the lower chakras.

How does siddhasana purify the nadis?

Swami Satyananda: How can a sitting position purify the nadis? Pressure on the perineum stimulates mooladhara

chakra, the point at which the three major nadis originate, and while the posture is being maintained, electrical and pranic impulses are constantly flowing up to the brain, purifying the nadis and removing all blockages. Also, meridians in the feet are stimulated. These are connected with the visceral organs, such as the stomach, gallbladder, liver, spleen and kidneys, which play important roles in purifying the blood. In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:39) it is written:

*Chaturasheetipeetheshu siddhameva sadaabhyaset.
Dvaasaptatisahasraanaam naadeenaam malashodhanam.*

Of all the eighty-four asanas, siddhasana should always be practised. It purifies the 72,000 nadis.

Even if no other asana is practised, siddhasana must be performed. Although there are other asanas which purify the body-mind complex, siddhasana balances the energy level by equalizing the mental and pranic forces. An unhealthy lifestyle leads to a buildup of toxins in the body and negative thinking, which subtly manifest as blockages in the nadis. If sushumna is to awaken, the nadis must be purified so that the energy flows freely, and ida and pingala are balanced. Siddhasana is essential for achieving this.

Why is it said that for advanced practioners, siddhasana is the only necessary asana?

Swami Satyananda: In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:41) it says:

*Kimanyairbahubhih peethaih siddhe siddhaasane sati.
Praanaanile saavadhaane baddhe kevalakumbhake.
Utpadyate niraayaasaatsvayamevonmanee kalaa.*

When perfection is attainable through siddhasana, what is the use of practising many other asanas? When the flow of prana is stabilized, the breath stops spontaneously (kevala kumbhaka) and a mindless state (unmani) arises by itself.

By practising only siddhasana and pranayama a higher state of awareness can be aroused. However, everybody has individual requirements depending on whether his nature is basically tamasic, rajasic or sattwic. Ultimately, when the mind is quiet and the body is fit for prolonged meditation, only siddhasana is needed.

Yogi Swatmarama is not asking the purpose of practising other asanas, rather he is pointing out that for one who is established in siddhasana, it is unnecessary to spend time in asana practice. Complete concentration and absorption in the object of meditation results in *kevala kumbhaka*, the spontaneous cessation of the breath. Conscious breath restraint and self-contemplation result in *kevala kumbhaka*, a state in which self-awareness diminishes and individual experience subsides. Therefore, Yogi Swatmarama is saying that if one experiences this in siddhasana, time should be spent practising siddhasana rather than other postures.

However, people belonging to the tamasic or rajasic categories need to practise a series of asanas and other forms of yoga to raise their pranic and conscious capacity. Siddhasana and raja yoga are perfect for the sadhaka who has a psychic temperament, but those who are emotional, devotional, extrovert, dynamic or analytical need other forms of yoga as well. Karma yoga and bhakti yoga harmonize the body, mind and emotions and help to subdue sensorial experiences. If the mind is basically tamasic or rajasic it needs a proper outlet of expression, otherwise during meditation practice it will cause havoc, wander here and there or just become dull and sleepy.

To attain higher experience the mind has to become totally absorbed in the point of concentration. If one is performing siddhasana and practising pranayama, there comes a stage when the two pranic forces, apana and prana, meet, and the alternating tendencies of ida and pingala unite in ajna chakra. At that moment the mind becomes unified and the breath stops. However, the mind must have a definite point of focus such as a psychic symbol, the guru,

a mantra or yantra, otherwise it will enter a state of void, or *shoonya*. Therefore, a combination of various elements which create higher experience is needed, not just an asana and stopping the breath.

Why is siddhasana considered so important?

Swami Satyananda: Swami Sivananda used to say, “Even if one’s mind is flying with passions, it does not matter, just sit in siddhasana for half an hour.” He told one of his household disciples who was a retired officer of the income tax department, “If you cannot give up smoking, it does not matter, but smoke in siddhasana.” By this, he meant that siddhasana itself was more important than any other practice.

In siddhasana moola bandha and vajroli take place at the same time. Moola bandha creates negative pressure and sends energy back through the spinal passage to the brain. Vajroli creates a negative pressure and reverses the sexual energy back to the brain. This is why the practices of kriya yoga should not be considered to be physical practices.

How can mudras and bandhas occur spontaneously?

Swami Satyananda: When prana is awakened, the body is naturally guided into various mudras, bandhas and pranayama techniques which may not even be known to the practitioner. This spontaneous movement occurs when certain yoga practices activate the pranic level to a higher intensity. In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* (1:42) it says:

*Tathaikasminneva dridhe siddhe siddhaasane sati;
Bandhatrayamanaayaasaatsvayamevopajaayate.*

Thus, through securing siddhasana, the three bandhas occur by themselves.

The three bandhas indicated are moola, uddiyana and jalandhara bandhas. *Moola bandha* is contraction of the perineum, *uddiyana* is contraction of the lower abdomen and *jalandhara* is the chin lock. These three bandhas are specific

methods of accumulating a greater pranic supply. They occur spontaneously when one is established in siddhasana, whether they are known or not.

What are the spiritual effects of siddhasana and siddha yoni asana?

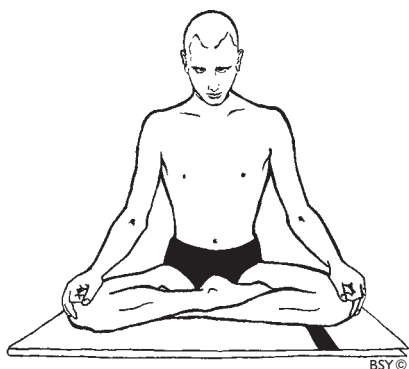
Swami Niranjanananda: The awakening of mooladhara chakra can occur with the correct practice of these asanas. In kundalini yoga, siddhasana and its female equivalent, siddha yoni asana are practised to generate the upward movement of apana vayu. In *Gheranda Samhita*, Sage Gheranda says that practising siddhasana brings mental control and a state of *shoonya*, thoughtlessness. When the pranas are activated and the mind becomes thoughtless, the path of *moksha*, liberation, is automatically opened. In *Gheranda Samhita* (2:7–8), it is written:

*Yonisthaanakamanghrimoolaghatitam sampeedya gulphetaram;
Medhroparyatha sannidhaaya chibukam kritvaa hridi sthaapitam.*

*Sthaanuh samyमितendriyo'chaladrishaa pashyanbhruvorantaram;
Hyetanmokshakavaatabhedanakaram siddhaasanam prochyate.*

An ascetic yogi places the heel of one foot midway between the genitals and the anus with the other heel pressing the pubis. Placing the chin on the chest, one remains motionless in a steady posture. Keeping the vision unmoved, one gazes at the eyebrow centre. Liberation is attained on perfecting this practice, which is called siddhasana. (7–8)

Sthaanuh samyमितendriyo'chaladrishaa pashyanbhruvorantaram indicates that the chin should be touching the chest in jalandhara bandha, and then one also gazes at the eyebrow centre, which infers shambhavi mudra. According to Sage Gheranda the final position of siddhasana includes jalandhara bandha and shambhavi mudra, which suggests he is speaking to advanced practitioners. This is also the description given in *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*.



Siddhasana with
mudra and bandha

When jalandhara bandha is practised, the chin is placed against the chest and *kumbhaka*, breath retention, is automatically achieved. But for how long can the breath be held? Average practitioners can only practise *kumbhaka* for a short period before there is a feeling of discomfort. If control over the breath can be mastered, enabling breath retention to be practised for

longer periods of time, mental turmoil ceases and physical energy is increased. The nervous system is maintained in a calm and normalized state. Practising *siddhasana* increases internal energy and expands the *pranas*, thus strengthening the capacity and stamina of the body and mind.

When Sage Gheranda includes *shambhavi mudra* and *jalandhara*, with its implications of *kumbhaka* in his description of *siddhasana*, he is describing the position which facilitates a meditative process. The simple variation generally used can be practised, but to experience the full version is not so much a practice as a state of attainment.

In different traditions this same practice is sometimes given different names: *gupta asana*, the secret posture, *vajrasana*, the thunderbolt posture, *muktasana*, the posture for liberation, which shows its importance. In *Hatha Yoga Pradipika* *siddhasana* is described at length and is said to be the most important of all the *asanas*. The full practice with *shambhavi* and *jalandhara* is given, and also the simple variation. In *Hatharatnavali* (3:24) *siddhasana* is described with *shambhavi mudra*:

*Yonidvaarakamanghrimoolaghatitam kritvaa dridham vinyaset
Medhre paadamathaikameva niyatam kritvaa samam vigraham*

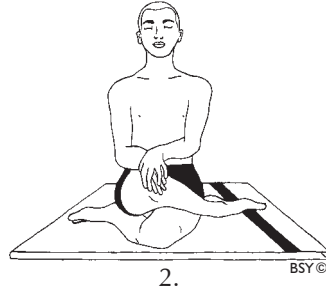
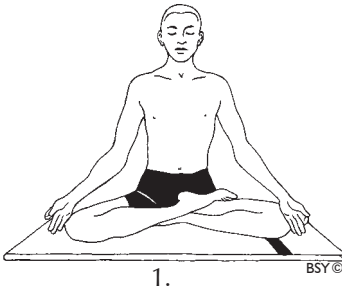
*Sthaanussamyamitendriyo'chaladrishaa pashchedbhruvorantaram
Chaitanmokshakavaatabhedajanakam siddhaasanam prochyate.*

Placing one heel against the perineum, fixing the other foot above the penis, bringing the whole body into a balanced condition, one should remain motionless with the senses controlled and the eyes steady, and look between the two eyebrows. This is called siddhasana, which forces open the door to salvation.

ADDITIONAL MEDITATION ASANAS

Note: Vajrasana, veerasana, bhadrasana and simhasana are listed in Chapter 4: Beginners' Asanas, in the vajrasana group.

1. Ardha Padmasana (half lotus pose)
2. Dhyana Veerasana (hero's meditation pose)



Appendices

Index of Questions

1. Understanding Asana

ASANA IN CLASSICAL HATHA YOGA

- What is the meaning of the term, 'yoga asana'? 7
- What is the definition of asana? 7
- What is the concept of asana in classical hatha yoga? 8
- How does the yogic tradition define asana? 8
- How many asanas are described in classical hatha yoga? 9
- Why are yogasanas spiritual? 9
- Which asanas are the most important according to classical hatha yoga? 10
- Why is the mental aspect important when defining asana? 13

EVOLUTION OF ASANA

- Why is there more emphasis on asana in hatha yoga than raja yoga? 14
- How and why did the ancient yogis develop the system of asanas? 14
- Which asanas are described in the Yoga Upanishads? 15
- Hatha yoga originally consisted of the shatkarmas – why were asanas later included? 15
- Why are so many asanas named after animals? 16
- What is the story of asanas in the modern era? 17
- Yoga is being modified by teachers around the world – is this true yoga? 18

PURPOSE

- Why should young people practice asanas? 19
- What is the main purpose of asanas? 19
- What is the first aim of asanas? 20
- Why is the purpose of asanas different in raja and hatha yoga? 20
- How does the traditional purpose of asanas differ from the contemporary approach to practice? 21
- How do asanas become a means to deeper states of awareness? 21
- Is the primary purpose of asanas to enable comfortable sitting during meditation? 22
- Are asanas practised differently for health and spiritual purposes? 22
- Does the practice of asana help harmonize and unite the ida and pingala nadis? 23
- Why is the practice technique important for achieving the aims of asana? 23
- What is the purpose of asana for sincere aspirants and initiates? 23
- Why should the physical and mental practices of yoga be practised side by side? 24
- Why are asanas important in spiritual life? 25

CLASSIFICATION OF ASANA

- How are asanas classified? 26
- What type of asanas are included in the beginners' category? 26
- Who should practise beginners' asanas? 26
- What type of asanas are classified as intermediate? 26
- When is a practitioner ready for advanced asanas? 27
- What is the classical point of view regarding dynamic and static asanas? 27
- Are static asanas traditional and dynamic asanas non-traditional? 27
- What is the difference between dynamic and static asanas? 29
- What is the role of dynamic asanas in classical yoga? 30
- How does one know whether to practise dynamic or static asanas? 30

2. Benefits and Effects of Asana

PHYSICAL AND HEALTH

- Why are asanas the ideal system of physical culture? 32
- Why are asanas so beneficial for health? 32
- What are the main benefits of practising asanas? 33
- How do asanas benefit the physical structure of the body? 33
- How does asana practice make the body healthy? 34
- How do asanas keep all the systems of the body in a healthy condition? 35
- How do asanas remove disease? 35
- What does scientific research say about the effect of asanas on the body? 37
- Why is the powerful effect of asanas on the endocrine system so significant? 37
- Do certain asanas influence specific parts of the body? 38
- Are asanas more effective at curing disorders or preventing them? 39
- How do asanas help prevent disease? 39
- Why do asanas have such a powerful therapeutic effect? 40
- How do asanas help rectify the physical imbalances caused by daily life? 40
- Does asana practice create change at the neurocellular level? 41
- How does the practice of yogasanas help with weight reduction? 42

ASANAS AND EXERCISE

- Are yogasanas a type of exercise for the physical body? 42
- How does the effect of asanas on the body differ to the effects of exercise? 43
- What are the strengthening effects of asanas? 44
- Why are asanas more effective than exercise for developing flexibility? 45
- What is the role of dynamic and static asanas in sadhana? 45
- Why is it important to maintain static poses? 46
- What happens when a yogasana is held for some time? 46

ASANAS AND THE MIND

- What influence do asanas have on the mind-body complex? 47
- How do asanas influence one's mental outlook? 47
- How do asanas release mental tensions? 50
- What is the relationship of body and mind in the practice of asana? 51
- Why do the yoga texts always emphasize stability and comfort in asana? 51
- How does the daily practice of asana help to integrate body and mind? 52
- What is the effect on the mind of practising asanas regularly? 53
- What effect does breath synchronization in asanas have on the mind? 54

ASANAS AND THE PRANIC BODY

- How does asana practice affect the flow of prana? 54
- What effect do yoga asanas have on the energy channels in the body? 55
- What is meant by the release of energy blocks through practising asana? 56
- What happens when pranic blocks are removed? 56
- What is the role of asanas in balancing ida and pingala nadis? 57
- How do yogasanas affect the chakras? 57

ASANAS IN SPIRITUAL LIFE

- Should one persevere if asana practice is difficult? 58
- When should meditation take priority over asana practice? 58
- What type of asanas did the sages of ancient times practise? 59
- How do asanas prepare one for higher practices such as pranayama and meditation? 60
- How does one know which meditation asana to use? 61
- Why is it important to practise asanas prior to meditation? 62
- What influence do asanas have on the subtle levels of being? 62
- How do asanas influence the deeper realms of one's being? 64
- What type of asanas are described in the Yoga Upanishads? 65
- What is the place of advanced asanas in spiritual awakening? 66
- How do asanas help awaken the kundalini? 66

3. Asana Sadhana

PRACTISING ASANA

- Is asana an essential part of yoga sadhana? 68
- Where does yoga practice begin? 68
- How can asana be used for harmonious development of the body? 69
- How does one determine which asanas to practise? 69
- Should yoga students practice asanas according to the traditional scriptures? 69
- How should one prepare for the practice of major asanas? 70
- Why should asanas be practised slowly? 71
- There are many asanas available – what is a simple, balanced asana sadhana for daily life? 71
- Should one be aware of relaxation or action when practising asanas? 73
- How can the full potential of asanas be realized? 74
- What is perfection in asana? 74
- Is perfection of asana a physical state? 75
- How should one's awareness be expanded during asana practice? 75
- What range of experience can be had through the practice of asanas? 77

GENERAL GUIDELINES

- What are the general rules and precautions for practising asanas? 79
- What is some advice for those starting out in asana practice? 80
- Are there any dietary rules for asana practitioners? 81
- When are asanas contra-indicated? 81
- Is there an age limit to practising hatha yoga? 82
- What type of cleansing should be done before practising asanas? 82

PLACE OF PRACTICE

- What is the best environment for asana practice? 82

SEQUENCE AND TIMING

- How important is regularity in sadhana? 83

• Why is morning the best time for asana practice?	83
• Why is early morning the best time for asana practice?	83
• How much time should be spent practising asanas?	84
• How important is the order in which asanas are practised?	84
• How should one prepare for static asanas?	85
• Why practise asana before pranayama?	85
• How important is it to have the stomach and bowels empty when practising asanas?	85

APPROACH TO PRACTICE

• How much physical effort should be made while practising asanas?	86
• How should asanas be entered and exited?	87
• Why is it important not to have a competitive attitude when practising asanas?	87
• How should the awareness be directed when practising asanas?	87
• What are the signs of incorrect asana practice?	88
• Why are asanas practised slowly and with coordination of the breath?	88
• Why is cultivating awareness during asana practice important?	89
• Why is it important to practise yoga according to a traditional system?	90
• Why should asanas be practised in a systematic way?	91
• Why is relaxation practised during and at the end of asana sadhana?	91
• How does one know when to proceed to a more difficult practice?	92
• Why is daily asana practice important for the average person?	92
• Why is so much importance placed on asanas for the spine?	93
• What is the aim of uniting the breath with the asana while holding a posture?	93

TEACHING ASANA

• How important are instructions given by a teacher?	93
• Should yoga teachers use the Sanskrit names when teaching asana?	94

• Should asanas be the main component of a yoga class?	94
• How can teachers give beginners the best start in asana practice?	95
• Why is the guidance of a guru necessary for asana practice?	97

4. Beginners' Asanas

PAWANMUKTASANA

• What is pawanmuktasana?	99
• What is the origin of the pawanmuktasana series?	99
• What is the purpose of pawanmuktasana?	99
• Is pawanmuktasana a good starting point for beginners of hatha yoga?	100
• How are the pawanmuktasana practices classified?	101

PAWANMUKTASANA PART ONE

• What is pawanmuktasana part one?	102
• How should pawanmuktasana part one be performed?	102
• How much rest should be taken when practising the pawanmuktasana part one series?	103
• How do the pawanmuktasana practices relax the mind?	103
• How important is pawanmuktasana compared with more advanced practices?	104
• How can the maximum benefit be gained from pawanmuktasana part one?	105
• How can people with joint problems benefit from yoga?	105
• What is the effect of pawanmuktasana part one on the pranic body?	106
• Why is pawanmuktasana part one such an important yoga practice?	106
• Why is it claimed that if pawanmuktasana is practised, no other asanas are needed?	107
• What research has been conducted on the pawanmuktasana part one series?	108
• What are the effects of long-term practice of pawanmuktasana part one?	108

PAWANMUKTASANA PART TWO

• What is the purpose of pawanmuktasana part two?	112
---	-----

- What is the starting position for pawanmuktasana part two? 112
- How should the awareness be directed during pawanmuktasana part two? 112
- Should pawanmuktasana part two be practised as a complete series? 112
- How much relaxation should be practised during pawanmuktasana part two? 113
- What are the contra-indications for the practises of pawanmuktasana part two? 113

PAWANMUKTASANA PART THREE

- What are the effects of the shakti bandha asanas? 116
- What precautions should be observed when practising the shakti bandhas? 116

RELAXATION ASANAS

- Why are relaxation asanas important? 118
- Why are relaxation poses included in asana sadhana? 119
- Why do people need yoga for relaxation? 119
- How can one learn to relax fully? 121
- When should relaxation asanas be practised? 122
- How can relaxation be induced when one is extremely tense? 122

MAKARASANA: CROCODILE POSE

- How is makarasana described in traditional hatha yoga? 123
- How can makarasana help people with spinal problems? 124
- What are the effects of makarasana on the respiratory system? 124
- How long should makarasana be held? 125

SHAVASANA: CORPSE POSE

- What is the meaning and significance of shavasana? 125
- What is mritasana? 126
- Why is a practice as simple as shavasana so beneficial? 126
- Why should the palms face upward when practising shavasana? 127
- How can the maximum benefits be gained from practising shavasana? 127

- Why is shavasana sometimes used for breathing practices? 128
- How can the practice of shavasana be deepened? 128
- Why is it important to remain still and awake during shavasana? 129
- How often should shavasana be practised? 129
- How does shavasana help one develop pratyahara? 129

VAJRASANA GROUP OF ASANAS

- What are the vajrasana group of asanas? 130

VAJRASANA: THUNDERBOLT POSE

- What is the effect of vajrasana on vajra nadi? 131
- What is the effect of vajrasana on the nadis? 132
- How can vajrasana be used to assist digestion? 132
- How long should one sit in vajrasana? 132
- Where should the awareness be placed while practising vajrasana? 132
- What are the benefits of vajrasana? 132
- Why is vajrasana an important meditative asana? 133

VEERASANA: HERO'S POSE

- What is the meaning and significance of veerasana? 135
- How is veerasana described in the classical hatha yoga texts? 135
- How can the soothing effect of veerasana be deepened? 136
- Why is veerasana sometimes used as a meditation posture? 136

BHADRASANA: GRACIOUS POSE

- What is the meaning of bhadrasana? 137
- Why is bhadrasana traditionally identified as a meditation asana? 138
- What are the effects of bhadrasana? 139

SIMHASANA: LION POSE AND SIMHAGARJANASANA: ROARING LION POSE

- Why is simhasana recommended as a meditation posture? 139
- How is simhasana described in the hatha yoga texts? 140
- Why is simhasana an important asana for helping one develop stability? 141
- How does simhasana expand the breathing area? 142

- What are the effects of the mudras practised in simhasana and bhadrasana? 142
- What is the effect of the hand position in simhasana? 143
- How is simhasana practised with khechari mudra? 143
- What are the effects of the variations of simhasana? 144
- How does simhagarjanasana influence the voice? 144
- What is the ideal time to practise simhasana? 144

MANDUKI ASANA: POSE OF THE FROG

- What is the meaning of manduki asana? 145
- What is the purpose of manduki asana? 145

SHASHANKASANA: POSE OF THE MOON

- What are the physiological benefits of shashankasana? 145
- How does shashankasana help the management of anger? 146
- What is the effect of relaxation on memory? 148

SANKATASANA: POSE FOR TROUBLE

- What are the meaning and purpose of sankatasana? 148

STANDING ASANAS

- What are the benefits of the standing asanas? 151

TADASANA: PALM TREE POSE

- Why is tadasana an important posture? 151

TRIKONASANA: TRIANGLE POSE

- What are the benefits of trikonasana? 152

SURYA NAMASKARA

- What is surya namaskara? 157
- What is the meaning and significance of surya namaskara? 157
- What are the origins of surya namaskara? 157
- What is the purpose of surya namaskara? 158
- When is the best time to practise surya namaskara? 158
- How should one mentally prepare for the practice of surya namaskara? 158
- How can the pranic effect be maximized when practising surya namaskara? 159
- Why is it important to spend time in shavasana after practising surya namaskara? 160

- How is chakra awareness practised during surya namaskara? 161
- How is mantra included in the practice of surya namaskara? 161
- What is the effect of surya namaskara on pingala nadi? 163
- How can surya namaskara become a complete sadhana? 164
- What are the psychodynamics of surya namaskara? 165

CHANDRA NAMASKARA

- What is the difference between surya namaskara and chandra namaskara? 167
- What symbolism is associated with chandra namaskara? 168
- When is the best time to practise chandra namaskara? 168
- How can one mentally prepare for practising chandra namaskara? 169

5. Intermediate Asanas

BACKWARD BENDING ASANAS

- How do backward bending asanas keep the spine and back healthy? 170
- Which backward bends should be practised for complete spinal health? 171
- How do bhujangasana, shalabhasana and dhanurasana complement each other? 172
- Why do backward bending asanas have an extroverting effect? 172

BHUJANGASANA: COBRA POSE

- What is the meaning of bhujangasana? 173
- What are the effects of bhujangasana? 173
- Why is bhujangasana recommended for women? 174

SHALABHASANA: LOCUST POSE

- What is the meaning of shalabhasana? 174
- What are the physical effects of shalabhasana? 175
- How does shalabhasana affect the internal organs? 176

DHANURASANA: BOW POSE

- How is dhanurasana described in traditional hatha yoga? 176
- How can the practice of dhanurasana be developed? 176
- What is the correct way to practise dhanurasana? 177

• What are the health benefits of dhanurasana?	178
• What are the effects of dhanurasana on the spine?	179
• What is the purpose of rocking the body whilst in dhanurasana?	179
• How does dhanurasana affect the manipura region?	180
• How is the body moved while in dhanurasana?	180

GOMUKHASANA: COW'S FACE POSE

• How can gomukhasana be used as a meditation posture?	180
• Should the eyes be open or closed in gomukhasana?	181
• What effect does gomukhasana have on the pranamaya kosha?	181
• What influence does gomukhasana have on the respiratory system?	182

FORWARD BENDING ASANAS

• How do forward bending asanas create a relaxed, internalized state?	184
• Why do many people find forward bending asanas difficult?	185
• What is the effect of forward bending asanas on the physical body?	185
• What is the effect of forward bending asanas on the abdominal organs?	187
• How do forward bending asanas help relieve constipation?	187
• How do forward bending asanas assist digestion?	188
• What is the effect of forward bending asanas on the production of insulin?	189
• What is the effect of forward bending asanas on the kidneys?	189
• What is the effect of forward bending asanas on the pelvic organs?	189
• What are the effects of forward bending on the legs?	189
• What is the effect of forward bending asanas on height and obesity?	190
• What is the psychological effect of forward bending asanas?	190
• How can forward bends help transform the personality?	191

JANU SIRSHASANA: HEAD TO KNEE POSE

• What are the benefits of janu sirshasana?	192
• How should the mind be directed during janu sirshasana?	192

PASCHIMOTTANASANA: BACK STRETCHING POSE

- What is the meaning and significance of paschimottanasana? 192
- How is paschimottanasana described in the classical hatha yoga texts? 194
- What are the health benefits of paschimottanasana? 195
- Why is paschimottanasana recommended before practising meditation? 196
- How can the spiritual benefits of paschimottanasana be gained? 196

PADAHASTASANA: HAND TO FOOT POSE

- What are the benefits of padahastanasana? 197

SPINAL TWISTING ASANAS

- Why are spinal twisting asanas important? 201
- Why are twisting asanas included in yoga? 201

ARDHA MATSYENDRASANA: HALF SPINAL TWIST POSE

- What is the origin of ardha matsyendrasana? 202
- What is matsyendrasana? 202
- Do the variations of matsyendrasana have different purposes? 203
- What are the benefits of ardha matsyendrasana? 204
- How does matsyendrasana help to awaken kundalini? 205
- Why is regular practice of ardha matsyendrasana important? 206

INVERTED ASANAS

- How are the inverted asanas classified? 208
- How important is technique in the practice of inverted asanas? 208
- What are the general effects of inverted asanas? 208
- What is the effect of inverted asanas on the breath? 209
- What are the effects of inverted asanas on the brain? 209
- What are the effects of inverted asanas on the circulatory system? 210
- What is the effect of inverted asanas on the digestive and excretory systems? 211

- What is the effect of inverted poses on the reproductive system? 211
- What is the effect of inverted poses on the ears and eyes? 212
- How do inversions affect the influence of gravity on the internal organs? 212
- Why are inversions beneficial when it is such an unnatural position for the body? 213
- What are the mental and psychological effects of inverted asanas? 213
- What are the spiritual benefits of inverted asanas? 214

VIPAREETA KARANI ASANA: INVERTED POSE

- What is the meaning and significance of vipareeta karani mudra? 215
- What is the difference between vipareeta karani asana and vipareeta karani mudra? 216
- How is vipareeta karani described in classical hatha yoga texts? 216
- What is the difference between vipareeta karani asana and sarvangasana? 217
- Why is vipareeta karani referred to in the hatha yoga scriptures, while sarvangasana is not mentioned? 217

SARVANGASANA: SHOULDER STAND POSE

- What is the meaning and significance of sarvangasana? 218
- What asanas are recommended for those who are short of time? 219
- How does sarvangasana improve one's health? 219
- What are the general health benefits of sarvangasana? 220
- What is the effect of sarvangasana on respiration? 220
- What is the effect of sarvangasana on the upper body? 221
- What is the effect of sarvangasana on the spine? 222
- What is the effect of sarvangasana on the nervous system? 222
- What is the effect of sarvangasana on blood pressure and stress? 223

HALASANA: PLOUGH POSE

- What is the meaning of halasana? 223

• When should halasana be practised within an asana sequence?	223
• Why should halasana be practised after sarvangasana?	224
• What is the effect of the position of the legs in halasana?	224
• How does halasana maintain youthfulness?	224
• What is the effect of halasana on the abdomen?	225
• What is the effect of halasana on the nervous system?	225
• Where should the awareness be focused during halasana?	226
• What are the effects of halasana compared with forward bending asanas?	226
• What is the subtle effect of halasana?	226

SIRSHASANA: HEADSTAND POSE

• What is the meaning and significance of sirshasana?	227
• Why is sirshasana known as the king of asanas?	227
• What experiences have people had by remaining in sirshasana for some time?	228
• What attitude should one have towards practising sirshasana?	229
• How do the benefits of sirshasana differ from other inverted poses?	229
• What are the effects of sirshasana on blood pressure and respiration?	229
• What is the effect of sirshasana on the spine?	230
• What is the effect of sirshasana on respiration?	230
• Where should concentration be focused during sirshasana?	231

BALANCING ASANAS

• What are the effects of balancing asanas on the brain?	234
• What is the effect of balancing asanas on the mind?	235

VATAYANASANA: FLYING HORSE POSE

• What is the meaning and significance of vatayanasana?	235
• How is vatayanasana described in classical hatha yoga?	236
• What are the benefits of vatayanasana?	236

UTKATASANA: POSE FOR DIFFICULTIES

• What is the meaning of utkatasana?	237
--------------------------------------	-----

PADMASANA GROUP OF ASANAS

- What is the purpose of the padmasana group of asanas? 243
- What precautions apply to the padmasana group? 243

YOGAMUDRASANA: PSYCHIC UNION POSE

- What is the meaning and significance of yogamudrasana? 244
- What are the benefits of yogamudrasana? 244

MATSYASANA: FISH POSE

- What is the meaning of matsyasana? 245
- When should the variations of matsyasana be used? 245
- What is the best sequence for practising matsyasana? 246
- Why is matsyasana practised after sarvangasana? 246
- What are the benefits of matsyasana? 246

BADDHA PADMASANA: LOCKED LOTUS POSE

- How can the maximum benefit be derived from practising baddha padmasana? 247
- What are the health benefits of baddha padmasana? 247
- How can baddha padmasana be used to help maintain brahmacharya? 248

KUKKUTASANA: COCKEREL POSE

- What is the meaning of kukkutasana? 248
- What are the spiritual effects of kukkutasana? 249
- What is the relationship between breath awareness and mooladhara in kukkutasana? 249
- What is the effect of focusing energy into mooladhara by practising kukkutasana? 250

UTTHAN KOORMASANA: STRETCHING TORTOISE POSE

- What is the difference between kukkutasana and utthan koormasana? 250

6. Advanced Asanas

PURPOSE

- Why are advanced asanas practised? 253
- What is the role of advanced asanas in hatha yoga? 253
- When is a student ready to practise advanced asanas? 253

- Are the advanced asanas therapeutic? 254
- How can advanced asanas lead to personality transformation? 254
- When do mudra and bandha become part of asana? 254

KOORMASANA: TORTOISE POSE

- What is koormasana? 254
- What are the different ways of practising koormasana? 255
- Which asanas are suitable counterposes for koormasana? 256
- What are the general benefits of practising koormasana? 256
- What are the effects of koormasana on the nadis? 256
- What are the spiritual effects of koormasana? 256
- How does koormasana help awaken sushumna nadi? 257
- What is the effect of flattening the front of the body against the floor in koormasana? 258
- What is the effect of koormasana on the granthis? 258

CHAKRASANA: WHEEL POSE

- Who is chakrasana suitable for? 259
- What are the general benefits of chakrasana? 259
- What is the effect of chakrasana on the nervous system and the pranic body? 259
- Why do many people find it difficult to raise the body into chakrasana? 260

POORNA MATSYENDRASANA: FULL SPINAL TWIST POSE

- When is one ready to practice poorna matsyendrasana? 261
- How can poorna matsyendrasana be developed? 261
- What are the benefits of poorna matsyendrasana? 261

MAYURASANA: PEACOCK POSE

- What is the meaning and significance of mayurasana? 262
- How can a practitioner prepare the body for the practice of mayurasana? 262
- What qualities must one have in order to practise mayurasana? 263
- Is mayurasana suitable for women? 264
- How can purification of the body be maximized using mayurasana? 264

- What are the most important characteristics of mayurasana? 264
- Why is mayurasana considered to be a major yogasana? 265
- What is the power of mayurasana? 265

GORAKSHASANA: YOGI GORAKHNATH'S POSE

- What is the purpose of gorakshasana? 265

VRISCHIKASANA: SCORPION POSE

- What is the meaning and significance of vrischikasana? 266
- Why is vrischikasana so beneficial? 267
- What is the effect of vrischikasana on the spine? 267
- What are the effects of vrischikasana on the abdomen? 268
- What is the effect of vrischikasana on the brain? 268

7. Meditation Asanas

PURPOSE

- Why is steadiness of the asana so important during meditation? 274
- What is the purpose of meditation asanas? 274
- Why are specific sitting postures recommended when practising meditation? 275
- Why are certain meditative asanas used for higher practices? 276
- What are the important features of meditation asanas? 276
- What is the classical understanding of perfection in a meditation asana? 278

RECOMMENDED MEDITATION ASANAS

- Which meditation asanas are recommended by the classical texts of hatha yoga? 279
- What are some alternative meditation asanas? 280
- Why do many westerners find it difficult to sit cross-legged? 280
- How does one know which meditative asana to practise? 280

PREPARATION FOR SITTING

- How can steadiness in meditation be cultivated? 282
- How can mastery of meditation asanas be attained? 282
- How can the body be prepared for sitting during pranayama and meditation? 284

- What precautions should be observed when practising meditation asanas? 285
- Should one force the body into meditation asanas? 285
- How important is the posture of the back in meditation asanas? 285
- What should be done if there is pain in the legs or back during a seated practice? 286
- How can the duration of comfort in meditative asanas be prolonged? 287

SUKHASANA: EASY POSE

- Is sukhāsana, the easy pose, recognized as a meditation posture in hatha yoga? 288

PADMASANA: LOTUS POSE

- What is the meaning and significance of padmasana? 289
- Why is padmasana revered as a meditative asana? 289
- How is padmasana described in the classical hatha yoga tradition? 290
- How can the practice of padmasana lead to the awakening of kundalini? 292
- How is padmasana practised in hatha yoga? 293
- Does the practice of padmasana include mudra and bandha in classical hatha yoga? 295
- Why does padmasana lead to deep states of relaxation? 295
- What are the psychophysiological effects of padmasana? 296
- How can the effect of padmasana on mind and prana lead to self-realization? 297

SWASTIKASANA: THE AUSPICIOUS POSE

- What is the meaning and significance of swastikasana? 299
- What is the effect of swastikasana on the physical and pranic bodies? 300
- When should swastikasana be used for meditation? 302

SIDDHASANA: ACCOMPLISHED POSE

- What are the best meditation asanas? 302
- What is the meaning and significance of siddhasana? 303

• Why is siddhasana said to be the best posture for meditation?	304
• What is the effect of siddhasana and siddha yoni asana on the chakras?	305
• What makes siddhasana such a unique meditation asana?	306
• How does siddhasana purify the nadis?	307
• Why is it said that for advanced practioners, siddhasana is the only necessary asana?	308
• Why is siddhasana considered so important?	310
• How can mudras and bandhas occur spontaneously?	310
• What are the spiritual effects of siddhasana and siddha yoni asana?	311

Index of Scriptural Quotes

BHAGAVAD GITA	338
GHERANDA SAMHITA OF SAGE GHERANDA	338
HATHA YOGA PRADIPIKA OF YOGI SWATMARAMA	342
HATHARATNAVALI OF SRINIVASA BHATTA MAHAYOGINDRA	345
SHIVA SAMHITA	346
YOGA SUTRAS OF SAGE PATANJALI	347

BHAGAVAD GITA

2. Benefits and Effects of Asana

(6:11) In a clean spot, having established a firm seat of his own, neither too high nor too low, made of a cloth, a skin and kush grass, one over the other. 60

(6:12) There, having made the mind one-pointed, with the actions of the mind and the senses controlled, let him, seated on the seat, practise yoga for the purification of the self. 60

(6:13) Let him firmly hold his body, head and neck erect and still, gazing at the tip of his nose, without looking around. 60

6. Advanced Asanas

(2:58) When one can withdraw the senses from association with other objects, as a tortoise withdraws its limbs from external danger; then one is firmly fixed on the path towards wisdom. 257

GHERANDA SAMHITA OF SAGE GHERANDA

1. Understanding Asana

(2:1) The number of asanas is the same as the number of animal species in the world. Lord Shiva described eighty-four lakh (8,400,000) asanas first of all, out of which eighty-four are best. 11

(2:2) Out of these eighty-four asanas, thirty-two asanas should be considered as especially auspicious in this mortal world. 11

(2:3–6) In this mortal world, where death of every human being is mandatory, the following thirty-two asanas are sufficient to attain perfection: 1. siddhasana; 2. padmasana; 3. bhadrasana; 4. muktasana; 5. vajrasana; 6. swastikasana; 7. simhasana; 8. gomukhasana; 9. veerasana; 10. dhanurasana; 11. mritasana (shavasana); 12. guptasana; 13. matsyasana; 14. matsyendrasana; 15. gorakshasana; 16. paschimottanasana; 17. utkatasana; 18. sankatasana; 19. mayurasana; 20. kukkutasana; 21. koormasana; 22. utthan koormasana; 23. mandookasana; 24. utthan mandookasana; 25. vriksh-

asana; 26. garudasana; 27. vrishasana; 28. shalabhasana;
 29. makarasana; 30. ushtrasana; 31. bhujangasana;
 32. yogasana. 12

2. Benefits and Effects of Asana

(1:10) Through shatkarmas purification of the body is achieved, through asanas firmness, through mudras steadiness and through pratyahara patience is achieved. 44

4. Beginners' Asanas

(2:40) Lie with the chest on the ground and the legs spread out and hold the head in the arms. This asana, which activates fire of the body, is called makarasana. 123

(2:20) Relax the whole body on the floor like a dead person. Shavasana removes fatigue and relaxes the mind. 126

(2:13) Making both thighs hard and strong like vajra, the feet are placed on either side of the anus, and then it becomes vajrasana. This asana provides siddhi (perfection) to yogis. 133

(2:18) Placing one foot near the thigh of the other leg and keeping the other foot at the back is called veerasana. 135

(2:10) With care, place both heels underneath the testes. 138

(2:11) Hold both big toes from behind, adopt jalandhara bandha and gaze at the nosetip. Bhadrasana eradicates all diseases. 138

(2:15) Placing the upturned heels of both feet crosswise underneath the testes, have the knees on the ground, the hands on the knees and open the mouth. 140

(2:16) Perform jalandhara bandha, fixing the gaze at the eyebrow centre or at the nosetip. This asana by the name of simhasana eradicates all diseases. 140

(2:29) Keeping the part of the left leg below the knee on the floor, wrap the right leg around the left leg and then place both hands on the knees. This is called sankatasana. 149

5. Intermediate Asanas

(2:42–43) Keep the body, from the toes to the navel, on the floor and placing the palms of the hands also firmly on the floor, raise the head like a snake. This is called bhujangasana. The fire of the body increases, all diseases are destroyed and kundalini shakti is awakened by the practice of bhujangasana. 173

(2:39) Lie flat with the face towards the ground. Both arms are placed by the sides of the chest. The palms should be placed firmly on the ground. The legs are raised in this position. Munis have called it shalabhasana. 175

(2:19) Stretch both legs straight on the floor like sticks. Taking both hands towards the back, catch hold of both feet and let the body acquire the shape of a bow. According to yogis this is dhanurasana. 176

(2:17) Placing both feet on the ground beside the buttocks, sitting upright with the body steady is gomukhasana, which resembles the face of a cow. 181

(2:27) Stretch both legs out, like a staff, on the ground in a natural way and grasp the big toes. Then place the head between the knees. Thus it becomes paschimottanasana. 195

(2:23–24) Pull the abdomen towards the back, keeping the back straight. Bend the left leg with effort, placing the heel over the right thigh. Support the right elbow on the leg. Placing the chin on the right hand, fix the gaze at the eyebrow centre. This is known as matsyendrasana. 203

(3:47) Place the head on the ground, provide support with both hands and raise both legs; this is vipareeta karani mudra. 216

(3:48) By practising it daily, old age and death are eliminated. The practitioner of this mudra attains siddhi (perfection) in all the lokas (worlds) and is not grieved even at the time of dissolution (of the universe). 216

(2:36) Place the right foot at the root of the left thigh and stand straight on the ground like a tree. This is called vrikshasana. 236

(2:28) Keeping the big toes of the feet on the floor, sit with their support without letting the heels touch the floor and

place the anal region on the heels. This will be known as
utkatasana. 237

(2:22) In the position of mukta padmasana bring the elbows
of both hands around the head and lie flat on the floor.
This destroyer of diseases is called matsyasana. 245

(2:31) Sit in padmasana. Insert the hands between the
thighs and calves and place them on the floor. Placing the
palms of the hands firmly on the floor; raise the body from
the floor. The body will be supported on the elbows. It is
called kukkutasana. 248

(2:33) Practising kukkutasana, then holding the shoulders
in both hands in kukkutasana and straightening the body
like a tortoise is called utthan koormasana. 251

6. Advanced Asanas

(2:32) Placing both heels underneath the testes in opposite
directions and sitting with the body, head and neck straight
and in line, is called koormasana. 255

(2:30) Keeping the palms of both hands firmly on the floor;
place both elbows to the rear on each side of the navel.
Then raise both the legs and body like a stick (horizontal).
This is called mayurasana. 263

(2:25–26) Keep the toes of both the feet in a hidden manner
in the middle of both thighs and knees. Holding both heels
with both hands, contract the throat and fix the gaze at the
nosetip. This gorakshasana enables yogis to attain siddhi. 266

7. Meditation Asanas

(2:12) Keeping the left heel close to the perineum, place
the right heel over it and sit with the head, neck and
body upright and straight. Muktasana provides siddhi
(perfection) to yogis. 288

(2:9) Keeping the left foot on the right thigh and the right
foot on the left thigh, bring the arms behind the back and
catch hold of the left big toe with the right hand and the
right big toe firmly with the left hand, look at the nosetip,
keeping the chin in contact with the heart. It eradicates all
diseases. It is called padmasana. 295

(2:14) Placing both the soles between the thighs and knees, adopt a triangular posture and sit with a balanced feeling. This is called swastikasana. 302

(2:7–8) An ascetic yogi places the heel of one foot midway between the genitals and the anus with the other heel pressing the pubis. Placing the chin on the chest, one remains motionless in a steady posture. Keeping the vision unmoved, one gazes at the eyebrow centre. Liberation is attained on perfecting this practice, which is called siddhasana. 341

HATHA YOGA PRADIPIKA OF YOGI SWATMARAMA

2. Benefits and Effects of Asana

(1:17) Prior to everything, asana is spoken of as the first part of hatha yoga. Having done asana one gets steadiness of body and mind, diseaselessness and lightness of the limbs. 55

(1:18) I will proceed to describe some of the asanas accepted by munis such as Vasishtha and yogis such as Matsyendranath. 59

4. Beginners' Asanas

(1:32) Lying flat on the ground with the face upwards, in the manner of a dead body, is shavasana. It removes tiredness and enables the mind (and whole body) to relax. 125

(1:21) Placing one foot by the (opposite) thigh and the other under the (same) thigh is known as veerasana. 136

(1:53) Place the ankles below the genitals on the sides by the perineum, left ankle on the left (side), right ankle on the right (side). 137

(1:54) Then hold the feet, which are on their sides, firmly with the hands and remain motionless. This is bhadrasana which destroys all diseases. The yogis who are perfected (siddhas) call it gorakshasana. 137

(1:50) Place the ankles below the scrotum, right ankle on the left side, left ankle on the right side of the perineum. 140

(1:51) Place the palms on the knees, fingers spread apart, keep the mouth open and gaze at the nosetip with a concentrated mind. 140

(1:52) This is simhasana, held in great esteem by the highest yogis. This most excellent asana facilitates the three bandhas. 141

5. Intermediate Asanas

(1:25) Holding the toes with the hands, pull them up to the ears as if drawing a bow. This is called dhanurasana. 176

(1:28) Stretching the legs (in front) on the ground, like a stick; bending forward, holding the toes with both hands and placing the forehead on the knees, is called paschimottanasana. 194

(1:29) Paschimottanasana is the best amongst asanas. By this asana the pranic currents rise through sushumna, the digestive fire increases, the abdomen becomes flat, and the practitioner becomes free from diseases. 194

(1:26) Place the right foot at the base of the left thigh, the left foot at the side of the right knee. Take hold of the left foot with the right hand, pass the left arm behind the waist and remain with the body turned. This asana is described by Sri Matsyendranath. 203

(1:27) Practising this asana increases the digestive fire to such an incredible capacity that it is the means of removing diseases and thus awakening the serpent power and bringing equilibrium in the bindu. 204

(1:23) Assuming padmasana, insert the hands between the thighs and calves, planting them (the hands) firmly on the ground, raise the body in the air. This is kukkutasana. 249

(1:24) Sitting in kukkutasana, join both the hands at the shoulders and lie flat on the back like a tortoise. This is uttankoormasana. 251

6. Advanced Asanas

(1:22) Press the anus firmly with the ankles in the opposite direction and sit well-poised. According to the yogis this is koormasana. 255

(1:31) Mayurasana quickly alleviates all diseases like enlargement of the glands, dropsy and other stomach disorders. It rectifies imbalance of the humours (vata, pitta, kapha). It reduces to ashes all food taken indiscriminately, kindles the gastric fire and enables destruction of kalakuta (a deadly poison). 262

7. Meditation Asanas

(1:33) (In all) eighty-four asanas were taught by Shiva. Out of those I shall now describe the four important ones. 279

(1:34) Siddhasana, padmasana, simhasana and bhadrasana, these are the four main asanas. Always sit comfortably in siddhasana because it is the best. 279

(1:44) Place the right foot on the left thigh and the left foot on the right thigh, cross the hands behind the back and firmly hold the toes. Press the chin against the chest and look at the tip of the nose. This is called padmasana, the destroyer of a yogi's diseases. 290

(1:45) Place the feet on the thighs, soles upward, palms in the middle of the groin, facing upward. 290

(1:46) Gaze at the nosetip, keeping the tongue pressed against the root of the upper teeth and the chin against the chest, and slowly raise the prana upward. 290

(1:47) This is called padmasana, destroyer of all diseases. Ordinary people cannot achieve this posture, only the few wise ones on this earth can. 290

(1:48) (Sitting in padmasana) keeping the palms one above the other, chin on the chest and concentrate the mind (chitta) on Him (the Self). Repeatedly draw the vital air up from the anal region and bring the inhaled prana downwards. (Thus joining the two) one gets the highest knowledge by awakening the Shakti. 292

(1:49) The yogi who, seated in padmasana, inhales through the entrances of the nadis and fills them with maruta or vital air gains liberation; there is no doubt about it. 297

(1:19) Placing both soles (of the feet) on the inner side of the thighs, sitting equipoised with a straight body. This is called swastika (asana). 301

- (1:38) Just as moderate diet is the most important of the yamas, and non-violence, of the niyamas, so the siddhas know that siddhasana is the most important of the asanas. 303
- (1:39) Of all the eighty-four asanas, siddhasana should always be practised. It purifies the 72,000 nadis. 308
- (1:41) When perfection is attainable through siddhasana, what is the use of practising many other asanas? When the flow of prana is stabilized, the breath stops spontaneously (kevala kumbhaka) and a mindless state (unmani) arises by itself. 308
- (1:42) Thus, through securing siddhasana, the three bandhas occur by themselves. 310

HATHARATNAVALI OF SRINIVASA BHATTA MAHAYOGINDRA

1. Understanding Asana

- (3:5) Some of the asanas adopted by sages like Vasishtha and yogis like Matsyendra are described by me. 9
- (3:6) The almighty Shambhu has described eighty-four asanas, taking examples from each of the 8,400,000 kinds of creatures. 9
- (3:7) I will describe some of these eighty-four asanas. These asanas told by Adinath bestow good health and happiness. 9
- (3:4) Asana, being the first component of hatha yoga, is dealt with here first of all by me. Asana brings mental as well as physical steadiness, health and a feeling of lightness. 10
- (3:20–21) Among all the above asanas only ten are important: svastika, gomukha, padma, vira-siddhasana, mayura, kukkuta, bhadra, simha and mukta. Among these, four are most important. Similar expressions are given in Hatha Pradipika. 10
- (3:22) Eighty-four asanas have been enumerated by Lord Shiva, I am describing here the four most important of them. 10
- (3:23) Siddha, padma, simha and bhadra are these four; the best among these is siddhasana, in which one should always stay comfortably. 10

7. Meditation Asanas

(3:28) There is no asana like siddha, and no kumbhaka like kevala; there is no mudra like khechari, and no laya like nada. 304

(3:24) Placing one heel against the perineum, fixing the other foot above the penis, bringing the whole body into a balanced condition, one should remain motionless with the senses controlled and the eyes steady, and look between the two eyebrows. This is called siddhasana, which forces open the door to salvation. 313

SHIVA SAMHITA

1. Understanding Asanas

(3:84) There are eighty-four postures, of various modes. Out of them, four ought to be adopted, which I mention below: 1. siddhasana; 2. padmasana; 3. ugrasana (also called paschimottanasana); 4. swastikasana. 11

5. Intermediate Asanas

(3:92) Stretch out both the legs and keep them apart; firmly take hold of the head by the hands, and place them on the knees. This is called ugrasana, it excites the motion of the air, destroys the dullness and uneasiness of the body, and is also called paschimottanasana. That wise man who daily practises this noble posture can certainly induce the flow of the prana in the back of the body. 194

(3:93) Those who practise this obtain all the siddhis; therefore, those desirous of attaining powers should practise this diligently. 194

(3:94) This should be kept secret with greatest care, and not be given to anybody and everybody. Through it pranic energy is induced to flow through the back in the sushumna, and a multitude of miseries are destroyed. 194

7. Meditation Asanas

(3:88) I describe now the padmasana which wards off (or cures) all diseases: having crossed the legs, carefully place the feet on the opposite thighs; cross both the hands and

place them similarly on the thighs; fix the sight on the tip of the nose; pressing the tongue against the root of the teeth (the chin should be elevated, the chest expanded), draw the air in slowly, fill the chest with all your might, and expel it slowly, in an unobstructed stream. 294

(3:90) By performing and practising this posture, undoubtedly the vital airs of the practitioner at once become completely equable, and flow harmoniously through the body. 298

(3:91) Sitting in the padmasana posture, and knowing the action of the prana and apana, when the yogi performs the regulation of the breath, he is emancipated. I tell you the truth. Verily, I tell you the truth. 298

(3:97) This is also called the sukhasana, the easy posture. This health-giving, good swastikasana should be kept secret by the yogi. 300

(3:95) Place the soles of the feet completely under the thighs, keep the body straight and sit at ease. This is called swastikasana. 301

(3:96) In this way, the wise yogi should practise the regulation of the air. No disease can attack his body, and he obtains vayu siddhi. 301

(3:86) He who wishes to attain quick consummation of yoga should adopt the siddhasana posture and practise regulation of the breath. 305

(3:87) Through this posture the yogi, leaving the world, attains the highest end and throughout the world there is no posture more secret than this. By assuming and contemplating in this posture, the yogi is freed from sin. 305

YOGA SUTRAS OF SAGE PATANJALI

2. Benefits and Effects of Asana

(2:47) By loosening of effort and by meditation on the serpent ananta, asana is mastered. 61

7. Meditation Asanas

(2:46) Steady and comfortable should be the posture. 278

Appendix C

Index of Illustrations

Advanced Asanas

Astavakrasana (eight-twists pose)	272
Brahmacharyasana (celibate's pose)	271
Chakrasana (wheel pose)	259
Dhanurakarshanasana (archer's pose)	270
Dhanurakarshanasana (archer's pose) variation	270
Dwi pada kandharasana (two-legged shoulder pose)	273
Dwi pada sirasana (two feet to head pose) stage 1	272
Dwi pada sirasana (two feet to head pose) stage 2	272
Eka pada rajakapotasana (one leg royal pigeon pose)	270
Eka pada sirasana (one foot to head pose)	272
Gorakshasana (Yogi Gorakhnath's pose)	266
Grivasana (neck pose)	271
Hanumanasana (Hanuman's pose)	271
Kashyapasana (Sage Kashyapa's pose)	273
Kehunyoordhva janu asana (knee on elbow pose)	271
Koormasana (tortoise pose)	255
Mayurasana (peacock pose)	262
Moolabandhasana (perineal contraction pose)	272
Niranjanasana (easy chair pose)	271
Niranjanasana (easy chair pose) variation	271
Padma mayurasana (lotus or bound peacock pose)	271
Padma parvatasana (lotus mountain pose)	273
Padma parvatasana (lotus mountain pose) variation	273
Parighasana (beam or cross-bar pose)	270
Poorna bhujangasana (full cobra pose)	270
Poorna dhanurasana (full bow pose)	270
Poorna matsyendrasana (full spinal twist pose)	261

Poorna shalabhasana (full locust pose)	270
Prishthasana (back pose)	270
Sirshapada bhumi sparshasana (head and foot touching the ground pose)	271
Utthan eka pada sirasana (standing foot to head pose)	272
Vikatasana (formidable pose)	272
Vishwamitrasana (Sage Vishwamitra's pose)	273
Vrischikasana (scorpion pose)	267

Backward Bending Asanas

Ardha chakrasana (half wheel pose)	184
Ardha chandrasana (half-moon pose)	183
Ardha shalabhasana (half locust pose)	175
Ardha shalabhasana (half locust pose) variation	175
Bhujangasana (cobra pose)	173
Dhanurasana (bow pose)	177
Gomukhasana (cow's face pose)	182
Kandharasana (shoulder pose)	183
Kapot namanasana (bowing dove pose)	184
Poorna dhanurasana (full bow pose)	177
Saral bhujangasana (easy cobra pose)	183
Saral dhanurasana (easy bow pose)	177
Sarpasana (snake pose)	183
Setu asana (bridge pose)	184
Shalabhasana (locust pose)	175
Tiryak bhujangasana (twisting cobra pose)	183
Utthan pristhasana (lizard pose)	184
Utthita ardha chandrasana (raised half-moon pose)	183
Vamadevasana (pose of Sage Vamadeva)	184

Balancing Asanas

Ardha baddha padmottanasana (half lotus forward bending pose)	241
Ardha padma padottanasana (half lotus leg stretch pose)	241
Baka dhyanasana (patient crane pose)	242
Bakasana (crane pose)	240
Dwi hasta bhujasana (two hands and arms pose)	242
Dwi pada angushthasana (double toe balancing pose)	241
Eka hasta bhujasana (single hand and arm pose)	242
Eka pada baka dhyanasana (one-legged crane pose)	242
Eka pada pranamasana (one-legged prayer pose)	238

Eka padasana (one foot pose)	240
Garudasana (eagle pose)	238
Garudasana (eagle pose) variation	238
Hamsasana (swan pose)	242
Jal kukkutasana (water bird pose)	240
Merudandasana (spinal column pose)	241
Mukta hasta merudandasana (rocking horse)	241
Natarajasana (Lord Shiva's pose)	239
Natavarasana (Lord Krishna's pose)	238
Niralamba paschimottanasana (unsupported back stretching pose)	241
Pada angushthasana (tiptoe pose)	241
Samarpan asana (pose of surrender)	241
Santolanasana (balancing pose)	242
Santolanasana (balancing pose) variation 1	242
Santolanasana (balancing pose) variation 2	242
Saral Natarajasana (preparatory Lord Shiva's pose)	239
Saral Natarajasana (preparatory Lord Shiva's pose) variation	239
Tandavasana (Lord Shiva's dance)	239
Utkatasana (pose for difficulties)	237
Utthita eka pada paschimottanasana (raised one leg spinal stretch pose)	240
Utthita hasta merudandasana (raised hand and spine pose)	241
Utthita hasta padangusthasana (raised hand to big toe pose)	240
Utthita hasta padangusthasana (raised hand to big toe pose) variation	240
Vasishthasana (Sage Vasishtha's pose)	242
Vatayanasana (flying horse pose)	236

Forward Bending Asanas

Ardha padma paschimottanasana (half lotus back stretching pose)	199
Bhumi naman asana (surrender to the earth pose)	200
Eka pada paschimottanasana (one leg spinal stretch)	198
Eka pada paschimottanasana (one leg spinal stretch) variation	198
Eka padottanasana (one leg raised to head pose)	200
Eka padottanasana (one leg raised to head pose) variation	200
Gatyatmak paschimottanasana (dynamic back stretch pose)	198
Hasta pada angushthasana (finger to toe stretch)	199
Janu sirshasana (head to knee pose)	192
Meru akarshanasana (spinal bending pose)	200

Pada prasar paschimottanasana (legs spread back stretch pose)	199
Pada prasar paschimottanasana (legs spread back stretch pose) variation 1	199
Pada prasar paschimottanasana (legs spread back stretch pose) variation 2	199
Padahastasana (hand to foot pose)	197
Padahastasana (hand to foot pose) variation	200
Paschimottanasana (back stretching pose)	193
Saithalyasana (animal relaxation pose)	198
Sirsha angustha yogasana (head to toe pose)	200
Skandhordhva janu asana (knee on shoulder pose)	199
Utthita janu sirshasana (standing head between knees pose)	200
Utthita janu sirshasana (standing head between knees pose) variation	200

Inverted Asanas

Ardha padma halasana (half lotus plough pose)	233
Bhumi pada mastakasana (half headstand)	232
Druta halasana (dynamic plough pose)	233
Halasana (plough pose)	223
Halasana (plough pose) variation	223
Kapali asana (forehead supported pose)	234
Kapali asana (forehead supported pose) variation 1	234
Kapali asana (forehead supported pose) variation 2	234
Moordhasana (crown-based pose)	232
Niralamba sirshasana (unsupported headstand pose)	233
Oordhwa padmasana (headstand lotus pose)	233
Padma sarvangasana (shoulder stand lotus pose)	232
Poorwa halasana (preliminary plough pose)	232
Salamba sirshasana (supported headstand pose)	233
Sarvangasana (shoulder stand pose)	218
Sarvangasana (shoulder stand pose) variation	232
Sirshasana (headstand pose)	227
Stambhan asana (posture of retention)	233
Vipareeta karani asana (inverted pose)	215

Meditation Asanas

Ardha padmasana (half lotus pose)	313
Baddha padmasana	292
Dhyana veerasana (hero's meditation pose)	313
Padmasana with mudra and bandha	292

Padmasana (lotus pose)	290
Siddha yoni asana (accomplished pose for women)	304
Siddhasana with mudra and bandha	312
Siddhasana (accomplished pose)	303
Sukhasana (easy pose)	288
Swastikasana (the auspicious pose)	300

Padmasana Group of Asanas

Baddha padmasana (locked lotus pose)	247
Garbhasana (womb pose)	252
Garbhasana (womb pose) variation	252
Gupta padmasana (hidden lotus pose)	252
Kukkutasana (cockerel pose)	248
Lolasana (swinging pose)	252
Matsyasana (fish pose)	245
Matsyasana (fish pose) variation 1	245
Matsyasana (fish pose) variation 2	245
Padmasana (lotus pose)	243
Padmasimhagarjanasana (roaring lion lotus pose)	252
Tolangulasana (weighing scale pose)	252
Utthan koormasana (stretching tortoise pose)	251
Utthan koormasana (stretching tortoise pose) variation	251
Yogamudrasana (psychic union pose)	244

Pawanmuktasana Part One

1. Prarambhik sthiti (base position)	110
2. Padanguli naman (toe bending)	110
3. Goolf naman (ankle bending)	110
4. Goolf chakra (ankle rotation)	110
5. Goolf ghoornan (ankle crank)	110
6. Janu naman (knee bending)	110
7. Janu chakra (knee crank)	110
8. Ardha titali asana (half butterfly)	110
9. Shroni chakra (hip rotation)	110
10. Poorna titali asana (full butterfly) stage 1	111
11. Poorna titali asana (full butterfly) stage 2	111
12. Poorna titali asana (full butterfly) variation	111
13. Mushtika bandhana (hand clenching)	111
14. Manibandha naman (wrist bending)	111
15. Manibandha chakra (wrist joint rotation)	111
16. Kehuni naman (elbow bending)	111

17.Kehuni chakra (elbow rotation)	111
18.Skandha chakra (shoulder socket rotation)	111
19.Greeva sanchalana (neck movements) stages 1–4	111

Pawanmuktasana Part Two

1.Padotthanasana (raised legs pose) stage 1	114
2.Padotthanasana (raised legs pose) stage 2	114
3.Padachakrasana (leg rotation)	114
4.Pada sanchalanasana (cycling)	114
5.Supta pawanmuktasana (leg lock pose) stage 1	114
6.Supta pawanmuktasana (leg lock pose) stage 2	114
7.Supta pawanmuktasana (leg lock pose) variation	114
8.Jhulana lurhakanasana (rocking and rolling) stage 1	115
9.Jhulana lurhakanasana (rocking and rolling) stage 2	115
10.Udghatita granthasana (open book pose)	115
11.Supta udarakarshanasana (sleeping abdominal stretch pose)	115
12.Shava udarakarshanasana (universal spinal twist)	115
13.Naukasana (boat pose)	115
14.Naukasana (boat pose) variation 1	115
15.Naukasana (boat pose) variation 2	115

Pawanmuktasana Part Three

1.Rajju karshanasana (pulling the rope)	117
2.Surya pushpam (sunflower)	117
3.Gatyatmak meru vakrasana (dynamic spinal twist)	117
4.Chakki chalanasana (churning the mill)	117
5.Nauka sanchalanasana (rowing the boat)	117
6.Kashtha takshanasana (chopping wood)	117
7.Namaskarasana (salutation pose)	117
8.Vayu nishkasana (wind releasing pose)	118
9.Kauva chalasana (crow walking)	118
10.Udarakarshanasana (abdominal stretch pose)	118

Relaxation Asanas

Advasana (reversed corpse pose)	130
Jyestikasana (superior posture)	130
Makarasana (crocodile pose)	123
Matsya kridasana (flapping fish pose)	130
Shavasana (corpse pose)	125

Spinal twisting asanas

Ardha matsyendrasana (half spinal twist pose)	202
Ardha matsyendrasana (half spinal twist pose) variation	202
Bhu namanasana (spinal twist prostration pose)	207
Marichyasana (pose of Sage Marichi)	207
Meru wakrasana (spinal twist)	207
Parivritti janu sirshasana (spiralled head to knee pose)	207
Poorna matsyendrasana	203
Saral ardha matsyendrasana (easy half spinal twist)	207

Standing Asanas

Akarna dhanurasana (bow and arrow pose)	154
Akramanasana (attacking pose)	156
Bandha hasta utthanasana (locked hand raising pose)	154
Dolasana (pendulum pose)	156
Druta utkatasana (dynamic energy pose)	155
Dwikonasana (double angle pose)	156
Kati chakrasana (waist rotating pose)	155
Meru prishthasana (spine and back pose)	155
Meru prishthasana (spine and back pose) variation	155
Samakonasana (right angle pose)	156
Tadasana (palm tree pose)	152
Tiryak kati chakrasana (swaying waist rotating pose)	155
Tiryak tadasana (swaying palm tree pose)	155
Trikonasana (triangle pose) variations 1–2	152
Trikonasana (triangle pose) variations 3–4	153
Utthanasana (squat and rise pose)	155
Utthita lolasana (swinging while standing pose)	156
Virabhadrasana (warrior pose)	155

Surya Namaskara and Chandra Namaskara

Chandra namaskara (salutations to the moon)	168
Surya namaskara (salutations to the sun)	160–164

Vajrasana Group of Asanas

Ananda madirasana (intoxicating bliss pose)	149
Ardha ushtrasana (half camel pose)	150
Ashwa sanchalanasana (equestrian pose)	150
Bhadrasana (gracious pose)	137, 138
Manduki asana (pose of the frog)	145
Marjari-asana (cat stretch pose) sequence	150

Naman pranamasana (prostration pose)	150
Padadhirasana (breath balancing pose)	149
Sankatasana (pose for trouble)	149
Shashank bhujangasana (striking cobra pose)	150
Shashankasana (pose of the moon)	46
Shashankasana (pose of the moon) variation 1	147
Shashankasana (pose of the moon) variation 2	148
Simhagarjanasana (roaring lion pose)	144
Simhasana (lion pose)	139, 143
Supta vajrasana (sleeping thunderbolt pose)	151
Supta vajrasana (sleeping thunderbolt pose) variation	151
Ushtrasana (camel pose)	150
Utthan mandukasana (upright frog pose)	151
Vajrasana (thunderbolt pose)	131
Veerasana (hero's pose)	135, 136
Vyaghrasana (tiger pose)	150

Glossary

Abhyasa – constant and steady practice without any interruption, which is performed with an attitude of reverence; to remain established in the effort of sadhana.

Acharya – spiritual preceptor; master.

Adinath – literally, ‘first lord’; primordial guru of all; cosmic consciousness; name of Lord Shiva given by the Nath sect of yogis; first guru of the Nath yogis.

Agni mandala – literally, ‘zone of fire’; in the body it relates to solar plexus and the digestive fire.

Ahimsa – non-violence in thought, word and deed; one of the five yamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See Yama.

Ajapa japa – continuous, spontaneous repetition of mantra; meditation practice in which mantra is coordinated with breath.

Ajna chakra – psychic/pranic centre situated at the medulla oblongata at the top of the spinal column in the mid-brain; seat of intuition, higher knowledge; third eye.

Akasha – space.

Akasha tattwa – space element; ether principle.

Anahata chakra – psychic/pranic centre situated in the spine behind the sternum; associated physically with the cardiac plexus, heart and lungs, mentally with emotion, especially love, and spiritually with atma, the spirit.

Ananda, anandam – pure bliss; natural state of consciousness.

- Ananta** – endless, infinite, boundless, inexhaustible; name of Vishnu, of Vishnu's conch, and of the serpent Shesha on whom Vishnu rests.
- Annamaya kosha** – sheath or body of matter; the sphere of existence created by food, maintained by food and which ultimately becomes food, i.e. the body.
- Antahkarana** – literally, 'inner tool', experienced or manifest mind, consisting of: ahamkara, manas, buddhi and chitta.
- Apana vayu** – one of the pancha pranas or vayus, it is located between the navel and the perineum. It flows downward and controls elimination and reproduction.
- Aparigraha** – abstention from greed; non-covetousness; one of the five yamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See Yama.
- Arjuna** – name of the third Pandava brother, who was the son of Lord Indra and Kunti. In the *Bhagavad Gita* he received a divine revelation from Sri Krishna.
- Asana** – a specific yoga posture; used in hatha yoga to channel prana, open the chakras and remove energy blocks; in raja yoga, a physical posture in which one is at ease and in harmony with oneself.
- Ashram** – place of spiritual practice and growth through internal and external labour.
- Ashwini mudra** – horse gesture; a yogic practice to redirect energy upwards; mudra involving contraction of the anal sphincter.
- Asteya** – non-stealing, honesty; one of the five yamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See Yama.
- Atmanubhuti** – perception, understanding of the self.
- Atma darshan** – glimpse of Supreme Consciousness; vision of the soul; understanding of the self beyond mind and body; self-realization.
- Atma, atman** – the self beyond mind and body; principle of life, highest reality, Supreme Consciousness, spirit, soul.
- Ayurveda** – science of health or medicine; the vedic system of medical diagnosis and treatment.

Bandha – psycho-muscular energy locks which close the pranic exits (like throat, anus); psychic locks that concentrate the flow of energy in the body at one point or plexus.

Basti – one of the shatkarmas; yogic enema.

Bhagavad Gita – literally, ‘divine song’; Sri Krishna’s discourse to his disciple Arjuna delivered on the battlefield of Kurukshetra at the commencement of the great Mahabharata war; one of the source books of Hindu philosophy, containing the essence of the Upanishads and yoga.

Bhairava mudra – a hand mudra; Bhairava is the name of Lord Shiva in his fierce aspect.

Bhairavi mudra – a hand mudra; Bhairavi is Shiva’s consort or Shakti, i.e. the power that manifests this particular aspect of existence.

Bhima – the second Pandava brother in the *Mahabharata* epic, son of Vayu and Kunti.

Bhrumadhya – trigger point for ajna chakra located at the eyebrow centre.

Bhujangini Devi – another name for kundalini shakti; bhujangini means female snake.

Bija – seed; seed state; source, origin.

Bija mantra – seed sound; a basic mantra or syllable.

Bindu – seed, source, drop; point of potential energy and consciousness, used in kriya yoga; the basis from which emanated the first principle according to the tantra shastra; nucleus; psychic centre located in the brain; in tantra and hatha yoga it also represents a drop of semen.

Brahma granthi – psychic/muscular ‘knot’ of creation, situated in mooladhara chakra, symbolizing material and sensual attachment. See Granthi.

Brahmacharya – being absorbed in higher consciousness; sensual restraint; celibacy; conduct suitable for proceeding to the highest state of existence; one of the five yamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See Yama.

Brahmamuhurta – the two hours around sunrise (in India between 4 am and 6 am) best suited to yoga sadhana.

- Brahman** – etymologically, ‘ever expanding, limitless consciousness’; name of Supreme Consciousness or cosmic intelligence according to Vedanta philosophy; God as creator; monistic concept of Absolute Reality.
- Buddha** – literally, ‘the enlightened one’; commonly referring to the founder of Buddhism.
- Chakra** – circle, wheel or vortex; pranic/psychic centre; confluence point of energy flows (nadis) in the body; the seven major chakras for descent of divine energy or for human evolution are sahasrara, ajna, vishuddhi, anahata, manipura, swadhisthana and mooladhara.
- Chin mudra** – psychic gesture of consciousness; a hand mudra. See Mudra.
- Chit** – thought; perception; understanding; in Vedanta, one of the three attributes of the ultimate principle.
- Chitta** – individual consciousness, including the subconscious and unconscious layers of mind; thinking, concentration, attention, enquiry; storehouse of memory or samskaras; one of the four parts of the antahkarana or inner instrument. See Antahkarana.
- Deva** – being of light; divine being.
- Dharana** – practice of concentration or complete attention; sixth stage of ashtanga yoga described in Sage Patanjali’s *Yoga Sutras* as holding or binding the mind to one point.
- Dhauti** – one of the shatkarmas; cleansing techniques for the digestive system, chest and head.
- Dhyana** – spontaneous state of meditation; one-pointedness of mind through concentration on either a form, thought or sound; absorption in the object of meditation; seventh stage of Sage Patanjali’s ashtanga yoga.
- Drashta** – witness, uninvolved observer, onlooker, seer; the consciousness which knows what is going on; the inner self.
- Drishti** – seeing, viewing.
- Gheranda Samhita** – traditional text on hatha yoga by Sage Gheranda. It explains seven limbs (saptanga) of yoga: shatkarma, asana, mudra, pratyahara, pranayama, dhyana and samadhi.

Gheranda, Sage – author of *Gheranda Samhita*, a classical yoga text which describes seven limbs of yoga.

Gorakhnath, Yogi – founder of the Nath sect; author of *Gorakhsha Samhita*.

Granthi – psychic knot; the three granthis on the sushumna nadi which hinder the upward passage of kundalini, viz. Brahma granthi, Vishnu granthi and Rudra granthi. See Brahma granthi. See Rudra granthi. See Vishnu granthi.

Guna – quality; the three gunas, qualities or aspects of prakriti are sattwa, rajas and tamas.

Guru – one who dispels the darkness caused by ignorance (avidya); teacher of the science of ultimate reality who by the light of his own atma can dispel darkness, ignorance and illusion from the mind and enlighten the consciousness of a devotee/disciple; preceptor.

Hanuman – name of a powerful monkey chief possessing extraordinary strength and powers which he manifested on several critical occasions on behalf of Sri Rama, the Lord of his heart.

Hatha yoga – a system of yoga specifically using practices for bodily purification; yoga of attaining physical and mental purity and balancing the prana (energy) in ida and pingala nadis so that sushumna nadi opens, enabling the experiences of samadhi.

Hatha Yoga Pradipika – a major classical text on hatha yoga compiled by Yogi Swatmarama, usually translated as ‘Light on Hatha Yoga’.

Hatharatnavali – a late medieval treatise on hatha yoga and tantra by Srinivasa Bhatta Mahayogindra.

Ida nadi – a major pranic channel running from the left side of mooladhara chakra to the left side of ajna chakra, governing the left side of the body and the right side of the brain. The ida energy flow criss-crosses the spine through the major chakras between mooladhara and ajna, conducting the passive aspect of prana manifesting as the mental force, lunar force or chitta shakti; also called chandra nadi as the lunar energy flows through it.

Indra – king of the vedic gods, the ruler of heaven; lord of the senses; the mind or the soul; the rain god.

Ishta – object of desire; the chosen ideal; the particular form of God one is devoted to.

Jalandhara bandha – throat lock; practice in which the chin rests forward upon the upper sternum.

Japa – a meditation practice involving repetition of a mantra.

Jiva – principle of life; individual or personal soul; living being.

Jivatman – individual or personal soul.

Jnana – knowledge, cognition, wisdom; higher knowledge derived from meditation or from inner experience.

Jnana mudra – psychic gesture of knowledge; hand mudra. See Mudra.

Jnani – one who expresses wisdom in daily life.

Kapalbhati – frontal brain cleansing breath; one of the six major cleansing techniques, shatkarmas of hatha yoga; process of purifying the frontal region of the brain by breathing rapidly through the nostrils with emphasis on exhalation.

Kapha – mucus, phlegm, one of the three humours (doshas) described in Ayurveda.

Karma – action and result; law of cause and effect.

Kaya sthairyam – literally, ‘body stillness’; practice of absolute steadiness and awareness of the physical body often performed as a preparation for pranayama or meditative states.

Kevala kumbhaka – spontaneous retention of breath.

Khechari mudra – literally, ‘the attitude of moving in space’; tongue lock; a hatha yoga practice in which the elongated tongue passes back into the pharynx to stimulate the flow of life-giving nectar (amrita), whereas in the milder raja yoga form the tongue is inserted in, or folded backwards towards, the upper cavity of the palate.

Kosha – sheath or body; a dimension of experience and existence.

Krishna, Sri – literally, ‘black’ or ‘dark’; eighth incarnation of Vishnu; avatara who descended in the Dwapara Yuga.

Sri Krishna is perhaps the most celebrated hero in Hindu mythology and seems to be an historical figure. To uphold dharma he orchestrated the Mahabharata war. His teachings to his friend and disciple Arjuna during that war are immortalized in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

Krishna paksha – the dark fortnight of the lunar cycle, i.e. full moon to no moon.

Kriya – action; cleansing practice (shatkarma); practice of kriya yoga.

Kriya yoga – practices of kundalini yoga designed to hasten the evolution of humanity.

Kumbhaka – internal or external retention of the breath.

Kundalini – the evolutionary energy in a human being; spiritual energy; Devi described as the potential energy of a human being dormant in mooladhara chakra, which when awakened, awakens the chakras, resulting in progressive enlightenment.

Kundalini yoga – path of yoga which awakens the dormant spiritual force, kundalini. See Kundalini.

Laghoo shankhaprakshalana – short intestinal wash; a practice of dhauti; one of the hatha yoga shatkarmas (cleansing techniques).

Laya – dissolution; union, fusion.

Loka – locationless dimension; plane of existence, dimension.

Maha bandha – the great lock; a combination of jalandhara bandha, uddiyana bandha and moola bandha, practised with external breath retention.

Manipura chakra – literally, ‘city of jewels’; psychic/pranic centre situated in the spine behind the navel; associated with the solar plexus and digestive organs and mentally with willpower; source of vitality and energy.

Manomaya kosha – mental sheath or body; mental sphere of life and awareness.

Mantra – words of power; sound vibrations which liberate the mind when repeated.

Maruta – another word for prana; god of wind.

Matsyendra, Yogi – see Matsyendranath, Yogi.

Matsyendranath, Yogi – one of the founders of hatha yoga; guru of Yogi Gorakhnath.

Medhra – plexus of the pranic body, nadi plexus located just a few centimetres below the navel.

Moksha – liberation from the cycles of birth and death and the illusion of maya.

Moola bandha – perineum contraction; contraction of the perineal body in the male and the cervix in the female body; technique used for locating and awakening mooladhara chakra.

Mooladhara chakra – the lowest psychic/pranic centre in the human body; situated in the perineal floor in men and the cervix in women; associated physically with the coccygeal plexus, excretory and reproductive organs, and mentally with the instinctive nature; spiritually it is the seat of kundalini.

Mudra – literally, ‘gesture’; psychic, emotional, devotional, and aesthetic gestures; attitudes of energy intended to link individual pranic force with universal or cosmic force.

Muni – one who contemplates; one who has conquered the mind; one who maintains silence or stillness of mind.

Nadi – flow; a river or channel of energy; psychic current; subtle channel in the pranic body, conducting the flow of shakti; comparable to the meridians of acupuncture.

Nasikagra drishti – nosetip gazing; a practice to stimulate mooladhara chakra.

Nataraja – name of Shiva during his cosmic dance, literally, ‘Lord of dance’.

Nauli – abdominal massaging; one of the shatkarmas in which the rectus abdominis muscles are contracted and isolated vertically.

Neti – one of the shatkarmas; nasal cleansing with saline water (jala neti), a waxed string (sutra neti) or other elements.

Paramatman – cosmic Soul or Consciousness; Supreme Self; the atma of the entire universe; God.

Patanjali, Sage – author of the *Yoga Sutras*; an ancient rishi who codified the system of raja yoga, including ashtanga yoga.

Pingala nadi – a major pranic channel in the body which conducts the dynamic pranic force manifesting as prana shakti from the right side of mooladhara chakra, criss-crossing the spine through the major chakras to the right side of ajna chakra; associated with the mundane realm of experience and externalized awareness; also called surya nadi as the solar energy flows through it.

Pitta – bile, one of the three humours (doshas) described in Ayurveda.

Prakriti – individual nature; nature; manifest and unmanifest nature composed of the three gunas; the active principle of manifest energy; counterpart of purusha in Samkhya philosophy. See Samkhya.

Prana – vital energy force sustaining life and creation, permeating the whole of creation and existing in both the macrocosmos and microcosmos.

Prana shakti – energy; dynamic solar force governing the dimension of matter; energy flow related to externalization of mind; the force of prana.

Prana vayu – pranic air current; also refers to a specific current, one of the pancha pranas or vayus, located in the thoracic region, from the throat to the diaphragm, responsible for processes of inspiration and absorption.

Pranamaya kosha – energy sheath, or vital pranic body; the sheath covering the self which is composed of pranic vibration and the rhythm of pranic forces.

Pranayama – a series of techniques using the breath to control the flow of prana within the body.

Pratyahara – restraining the sensory and motor organs; withdrawal and emancipation of the mind from the domination of the senses and sensual objects; training the senses to follow the mind within; fifth stage of ashtanga yoga described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras*.

Puranas – eighteen ancient texts containing the earliest mythology of the tantric and vedic traditions.

Raja yoga – the supreme yoga; union through control of the mental processes and concentration of the mind; the

most authoritative text is Sage Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras* which contains ashtanga yoga, the eightfold path.

Rajas – one of the three gunas or attributes; dynamism; state of activity; creativity combined with full ego involvement. See Guna.

Ramayana – one of the most famous ancient Indian epics, relating the life of Sri Rama, the most widely known version was composed by Valmiki, containing about 24,000 verses in seven chapters.

Rashi – twelve signs of the zodiac in Hindu astrology.

Rishi – seer; realized sage; one who contemplates or meditates on the Self.

Rudra granthi – literally, 'knot of Rudra (Shiva)'; psychic knot within ajna chakra which symbolizes attachment to siddhis or higher mental attributes. As the psychic block is overcome, the sense of personal identity ceases to block one's identification with the cosmic consciousness. See Granthi.

Sadachara – pure conduct.

Sadavichara – right enquiry.

Sadhaka – one who practises sadhana; a spiritual aspirant.

Sadhana – spiritual practice or discipline performed regularly.

Sahasrara chakra – 'thousand-petalled lotus'; abode of Shiva or superconsciousness; highest chakra or psychic centre, it symbolizes the threshold between the psychic and spiritual realms and is located at the crown of the head.

Samadhi – the culmination of meditation, state of oneness of the mind with the object of concentration and the universal consciousness; self-realization; the eighth stage of raja yoga.

Samana vayu – one of the five pancha pranas or vayus, it is located between the navel and the diaphragm; it flows from side to side and controls the digestion.

Samkhya – one of the six systems of Indian philosophy. Attributed to Sage Kapila, Samkhya is a spiritual science based on the division of all existence into the two eternal principles of purusha and prakriti, and the twenty-three

elements of creation; the philosophical basis of the yoga system.

Sannyasin – one who has taken sannyasa initiation, surrendering everything to the guru and the spiritual journey.

Sanskrit – language of the vedic civilization, still used in India and the yogic culture.

Satsanga – gathering in which the ideals and principles of truth are discussed; spiritual association; association with the wise and the good.

Sattwa – one of the three gunas, or attributes of nature; state of luminosity, harmony, equilibrium and purity. See Guna.

Satya, satyam – truth; speaking the truth; being truthful to oneself; honesty; one of the yamas described by Sage Patanjali in the *Yoga Sutras* as a preliminary practice of yoga. See Yama.

Shakti – primal energy; manifest consciousness; power; ability, capacity, strength, energy; counterpart of Shiva; the moving power of nature and consciousness; in Hindu mythology Shakti is often symbolized as a divine woman.

Shambhavi mudra – eyebrow centre gazing; psychic attitude focused on Shiva (Supreme Consciousness).

Shambhu – name for Shiva.

Shanti path – vedic mantra invoking peace.

Shastra – an authoritative treatise on any subject, particularly science and religion; sacred book.

Shatkarma – the six hatha yoga techniques of purification: neti, dhauti, basti, nauli, kapalbhathi and trataka.

Shiva – state of pure consciousness, individual and cosmic, original source of yoga. Lord of yogis; auspicious, benevolent one; name of the god of the Hindu trinity who is entrusted with the work of destruction; destroyer of the ego and duality.

Shiva Samhita – Sanskrit text enumerating the concepts and principles essential to the practice of yoga; classical text on hatha yoga.

Shoonya – void, state of transcendental consciousness; space behind the eyebrow centre.

Shukla paksha – the bright fortnight of the lunar cycle, ie. from no moon to full moon.

Siddha – an adept or perfected person; one who has developed his/her psychic and pranic capacity to the point of mastery.

Siddhi – perfection; enhanced pranic and psychic capacity; paranormal or supernormal accomplishment; control of mind and prana; eight supernatural powers obtained by yogis as a result of long practice.

Sthairyam – the third limb of Sage Gheranda's saptanga yoga; steadiness.

Sthira – firm, steady, fixed; immovable, still.

Sthirata – steadiness or firmness, either of mind through concentration or of body through the practice of asanas, mudras etc.

Sukham – pleasure, enjoyment, comfort.

Sukshma – subtle; relating to the world of the psyche.

Surya nadi – literally 'energy flow of the sun'; another name for pingala nadi. See Pingala nadi.

Sushumna – central energy flow (nadi) in the spine; it conducts the kundalini or spiritual force from mooladhara chakra to sahasrara chakra; the main energy flow related to transcendental awareness; situated in the spinal cord of the human body, it opens when balance is achieved between ida and pingala nadis.

Swadhisthana chakra – literally, 'one's own abode'; second psychic/pranic centre; located in the coccyx; associated with the sacral plexus and governing the urogenital system; the storehouse of subconscious impressions.

Swami – literally, 'master of the mind'; master of the self; title of sannyasins.

Swatmarama, Yogi – literally, 'one who revels within oneself'; the author of *Hatha Yoga Pradipika*, a classical text book on hatha yoga.

Tamas – one of the three gunas or attributes of nature; inertia, stability; ignorance, darkness; unwillingness to change. See Guna.

Tantra – a most ancient universal science and culture which deals with the transition of human nature from the present level of evolution and understanding to a transcendental level of knowledge, experience and awareness; a particular path of sadhana including mantra, yantra and other esoteric practices.

Tapasya – practice of austerity.

Trataka – one of the shatkarmas; a technique of gazing steadfastly upon an object such as a candle flame, black dot or yantra with unblinking eyes.

Uddiyana bandha – abdominal retraction lock; drawing in of the abdomen towards the backbone after exhaling.

Ujjayi pranayama – a subtle pranayama often used during meditation; the psychic breath.

Unmani – mindless; beyond the mind.

Upanishads – the philosophical portion of the Vedas, traditionally one hundred and eight in number, containing intimate dialogues and discussions between guru and disciple on the nature of the Absolute and the path leading towards it; literally, ‘to sit near and listen’ (to the spiritual teacher); regarded as the source of Vedanta, Yoga and Samkhya philosophies.

Vajra – literally, ‘thunderbolt’.

Vajra nadi – the nadi starting on the left side of the anus governing the sexual organs and processes, the digestive system, and related to the sciatic nerve.

Vajroli mudra – contraction and release of the male urinary passage to stimulate swadhisthana chakra and promote brahmacharya; controlling the emissions during sexual intercourse according to hatha yoga texts.

Vasishtha, Sage – a celebrated rishi and seer of the Vedas; guru of Sri Rama; author of many vedic hymns. His teachings are recorded in *Yoga Vasishtha*, one of the greatest expositions of jnana yoga.

Vata – wind, gas; one of the three humours (doshas) described in Ayurveda.

Vayu – wind, air; life breath or vital air; prana.

Vedanta – one of the six principle systems of Indian philosophy; literally, ‘the last part of the Vedas’; the school of Hindu thought based primarily on the Upanishads; the doctrine of non-dualism (Advaita).

Vidya – knowledge or science, particularly knowledge of spiritual truth and non-mundane reality.

Vishnu – vedic deity; the second deity of the Hindu trinity (Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva), entrusted with the preservation of the universe, a duty which obliges him to appear in several incarnations; Supreme Consciousness.

Vishnu granthi – psychic block or knot particularly related to manipura, anahata and vishuddhi chakras, symbolizing the bondage of personal and emotional attachment. See Granthi.

Vishuddhi chakra – literally, ‘centre of purification’, the psychic/pranic centre located at the level of the throat pit or the thyroid gland; it is the psychic centre particularly connected with purification and communication.

Vyayama – movement.

Yama – self-restraints or rules of conduct which render the mind tranquil; first stage of the eight limbs of yoga (ashtanga yoga) of Sage Patanjali’s Yoga Sutras: ahimsa (non-violence), satya (truth), asteya (honesty), brahmacharya (continence) and aparigraha (abstention from greed).

Yantra – a geometric symbol of cosmic power designed to unleash the hidden potential energy and consciousness; used in meditation and concentration practices.

Yoga – union; the root is yuj, meaning ‘to join’, ‘to yoke’; a system of practice leading to a state of union between the individual and universal awareness; practices, philosophy and lifestyle to achieve peace, power and spiritual wisdom as well as perfect health, a sound mind and a balanced personality; one of the six main systems of Indian philosophy.

Yoga mudra – literally, ‘attitude of psychic union’; an asana which becomes a postural mudra when awareness of the breath in a psychic passage is included.

Yoga nidra – psychic sleep; practice in which the body sleeps while the mind remains aware as its movements are guided and quietened by instructions, inducing deep relaxation of body, mind and emotions.

Yoga Sutras – ancient authoritative text on raja yoga by Sage Patanjali.

Yoga Upanishads – a group of approximately twenty-two Upanishads more specifically concerned with yoga.

Yogasana – see Asana.

Yogeshwara – Lord of yoga.

Yogi – an adept of yoga; follower of the yoga system of philosophy and practice.

Yoni mudra – attitude of the womb or source; a hand mudra; also another name for shanmukhi mudra.

General Index

- Acupuncture 56
Adrenalin 147, 191
Agnisar kriya, see dhauti kriya
Ajna chakra, see chakra
Anahata chakra, see chakra
Anandamaya kosha, see kosha
Anger 146–148
Anxiety 191
Archetype 165
Ardha chandrasana 167–168
Ardha matsyendrasana,
 description 202–204; effect
 204–206; origin 202
Asana, classification 26–31, 34;
 definition 2, 7–8, 27, 41, 51;
 effect 1, 3, 10, 20, 21, 29–30,
 32–67; guidelines 79–93;
 origin 1–2, 9, 14–15, 59–60;
 purpose 8, 19–26, 30–31, 50,
 57, 69, 87–88, 95
Astrology 162, 168
Attitude 86–87
Awareness 21–22, 49, 63–64,
 73–79, 87–88, 89, 104, 129
Baddha padmasana, effect
 247–248
Balance 234–235
Bandha 140–142, 254, 310–
 311; jalandhara bandha
 293–294, 311–312; moola
 bandha 293, 307; uddiyana
 bandha 293
Bhadrasana, description
 137–138; effect 139; process
 138–139
Bhujangasana, effect 172,
 173–174
Bihar School of Yoga 4
Bliss 274
Body-mind complex 2–3,
 13–14, 20, 24–25, 35–36,
 47–54, 75–76, 93, 121–122,
 126–127, 190–192
Brain 25, 142–143, 209, 213–
 214, 234–235, 298, 306–307
Breath 49, 54, 88–89, 93,
 124–125, 128, 142, 209, 249
 retention 308–309
Chakra 57–58, 90, 106,
 161–162; ajna chakra
 305–306; manipura chakra
 180, 205–206; mooladhara

- chakra 250, 305–306, 311;
swadhisthana chakra 305–306
- Chakrasana, description 259;
effect 259–260
- Chandra namaskara 167–169
- Circulatory system 186, 209,
210, 223, 224, 229
- Comfort 2, 13–14, 92, 284–
285, 287
- Concentration 231, 309–310
- Consciousness 298–299
- Constipation 86, 187–188, 225
- Creation 299
- Dhanurasana, description
176–178, 180; effect 172,
178–180
- Diabetes 34, 189
- Diet 81, 262–263
- Digestive system 112–115,
131–132, 188–189, 205–206,
211, 268
- Discipline 52–53
- Disease 35–36, 39–40, 49–50,
81–83, 100
- Divine Life Society 4
- Dosha 96–97
- Earth 250, 258
- Effort 61, 86, 278
- Emotion 49, 88, 201
- Endocrine system 17, 37,
47–48, 90–91, 147–148, 179,
218, 220
- Evolution 1–2, 16–18, 57–58
- Excretory system 189
- Externalization 57, 172
- Fear 191–192
- Feet, washing 134
- Flexibility 45, 70, 280, 282–283
- Gheranda Samhita 12
- Gomukhasana, description
180–181; effect 181–183
- Gorakshasana, purpose
265–266
- Granthi 258
- Guna, rajas 309; tamas 309
- Guru 97–98
- Halasana 223–226; effect
224–226
- Harmony 13, 24–25, 40–41
- Health 19–20, 32–42
- Humility 191–192
- Insulin 189
- Internalization 57, 184,
256–257, 297
- Janu sirshasana, effect 192;
process 192
- Joints 33, 105, 108
- Kaya sthairyam 283, 287–288
- Kidney 189
- Koormasana, description
254–256; effect 256–259
- Kosha 77–78; annamaya kosha
77–78; manomaya kosha 78;
pranamaya kosha 48, 78–79,
181–182
- Kukkutasana, description 248;
effect 249–250
- Kundalini 65–66, 205–206,
293, 298
- Lauliki, see nauli kriya
- Legs 153, 189–190
- Liver 225

- Makarasana, description 123; effect 124–125
- Manduki asana, description 145
- Mantra 95, 161–163
- Matsyasana 245–248; effect 246–247
- Mayurasana 262–265; description 264–265
- Meditation 58–59, 196, 214–215
- Meditation asana 136–137, 138–139, 139–140, 180–181, 266; description 276–278; effect 275–276; process 285–288; purpose 274–279
- Memory 108–109, 148, 227
- Metabolism 217–218
- Mind management 53–54, 64, 103, 235
- Mudra 254, 310; nasikagra drishti 250, 295; shambhavi mudra 142–143, 306, 311; vajroli mudra 307; vipareeta karani mudra 215
- Muscles 33, 45, 89, 119, 121–122
- Nadi 55, 108, 132, 256, 307–308; ida nadi 3, 23, 57, 164, 168, 296; pingala nadi 3, 23, 57, 163–165, 296; sushumna nadi 67, 193–194, 206, 257, 301; vajra nadi 130–131, 134
- Nadi shuddhi, see purification
- Naukasana 123
- Nervous system 37, 44, 142–143, 186, 188, 222, 225–226, 295–296, 306–307
- One-pointedness 121, 128–129
- Opposites 60
- Optic system 142–143, 212
- Overweight 42, 190
- Padahastasana; effect 197
- Padmasana 289–299; description 290–292, 295; effect 289–290, 292–294, 295–299
- Pain 56, 286–287
- Paschimottanasana 192–196 effect 195–197
- Patanjali, Sage 20, 28
- Pawanmuktasana 99–119; classification 101; definition 99; description 112–113; effect 103–110, 116; origin 99; purpose 99–101, 112
- Perfection 17–18, 74–75
- Physical exercise 3–4, 32–33, 42–47
- Pleasure 107, 306–307
- Poorna matsyendrasana 261
- Prana 3, 24–25, 32–33, 48–49, 54–58, 62–64, 78–79, 85, 106, 133–134, 159, 165, 181–182, 205–206, 291, 297–299, 306, 307–309; pranic block 56, 70, 100–101, 108, 116
- Pranamaya kosha, see kosha
- Pratyahara 60, 62, 78, 131
- Proprioception 260
- Purification 54–55, 262–265, 307–308
- Reflexology 143
- Regularity 30–31, 53–54, 84, 92, 109

- Relaxation 61, 73–74, 91–92,
103, 113, 118–130, 160,
277–278, 295–296
- Reproductive system 174, 189,
211, 307
- Respiratory system 182,
220–221, 230–231
- Sadhana 23–24, 45–46, 68–98,
164–165; guidelines 79–86
- Sankatasana, description
145–146
- Sarvangasana, description
218–219; effect 219–224;
process 90–91
- Self-realization 297–299
- Shalabhasana, description
174–175; effect 172, 175–176
- Shashankasana, effect 145–148
- Shatkarma 15
- Shavasana, definition 126;
effect 126–132; process
125–126; purpose 91
- Siddhasana, description
302–303; effect 304–313
- Simhagarjanasana 144–145
- Simhasana, description
139–141; effect 141–145
- Sirshasana, description
227–228; effect 227–232;
process 229
- Spine 55, 93, 124, 125, 145–
146, 152–153, 170–172, 179,
185, 201–207, 222, 224–225,
230, 257, 267–268, 285–286
- Spiritual life 23–24, 25, 58–67
- Stability 2, 13, 92, 129, 141,
274, 279, 282, 296
- Stillness 128, 129, 283,
287–288
- Strain 285
- Strength 44
- Stress 223
- Stretching 41, 45, 151–152,
259–260
- Sukhasana, description
288–289
- Sun 157–158, 162
- Surya namaskara, definition
157; effect 159, 163–167;
origin 157–158; process
158–159, 160–163; purpose
158
- Swastikasana, description
299–300; effect 300–301;
purpose 302
- Tadasana 151–152
- Teaching 93–98
- Tension 50–51, 56, 76, 120,
122–123, 170
- Thought 88, 136–137
- Tiredness 41, 88, 91, 127, 152
- Toxin 96–97
- Trikonasana 152–153
- Upanishads 15, 65–66
- Utkatasana, description 237
- Utthan koormasana,
description 250–251
- Vajrasana, effect 131–134;
process 132
- Vasishtha, Sage 59–60
- Vatayanasana, description
235–236; effect 236
- Vayu, apana vayu 205–206,
293, prana vayu 205–206,
293; samana vayu 201,
205–206

Veerasana, description 135–
136
Vipareeta karani asana,
description 215–217; effect
217–218
Vrischikasana 266–269; effect
267–269

Yoga, definition 7; hatha yoga
7–16, 20; jnana yoga 59;
process 68–69, 80; purpose
104; raja yoga 14, 20
Yoga class 94–95
Yogamudrasana, effect 244–
245
Yoga therapy 22–23, 34, 40

Notes



Conversations on the Science of Yoga is an encyclopaedic series presenting the vast, timeless culture of yoga topic by topic through the voice of three generations of masters – Swami Sivananda Saraswati, Swami Satyananda Saraswati and Swami Niranjanananda Saraswati. The teachings are given in question and answer format with the inclusion of verses from the scriptures, connecting the modern experience with the classical tradition.

Asanas, the yoga postures, have become the international symbol of yoga. Their unique health-promoting qualities make asanas the perfect balance for modern lifestyles. *Hatha Yoga Book 4: Asana* is a timely work, presenting both classical and modern interpretations of this ancient system which fulfils a fundamental role within the vast yogic culture. Their evolution, effects, classification and application are explained. Thirty-five asanas previously unpublished by the Bihar School of Yoga have been added to the repertoire, which is illustrated in its entirety.

Through the wisdom of these masters, a complete understanding of hatha yoga and a vision for its application in the modern era is interpreted for yoga aspirants around the world.



[bar code here]

ISBN : 978-93-81620-74-8